KALEE'S SHRINE

GRANT ALLEN

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KALEE'S SHRINE

BY

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"STRANGE STORIES," "BABYLON," "PHILISTIA," ETC

AND

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Arrowsmith's Bristol Library

VOL. XI

BRISTOL

J. W. ARROWSMITH, 11 QUAY STREET

LONDON

SIMPKIN, MARSHALL & CO., 4 STATIONERS' HALL COURT

1886

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KALEE'S SHRINE.

PROLOGUE.

In India.

HITE-ROBED and dusky-faced, the ayah hurried with trembling footsteps along the narrow path that threaded tortuously the tangled underbrush of that arid thicket. Her feet and ankles were bare to the knee, and the fine grey dust that covered them deep with its clinging powder bore witness eloquently to the distance she had already carried her precious burden—a pretty, sleeping, two-year-old baby. It was not her own, but a white man's daughter; and the white man was a great English sahib. At every rustle of the bushes in the jungle by her side, the woman shrank back with terrible earnestness—shrank, and pressed the sleeping baby tight to her bosom; for tigers lurked among the tangled brake, and the cobra might at any moment cross her path with his deadly hood erect and hissing. But still she hurried on, alone and breathless, that one solitary Hindu figure,

tall and graceful in her snowy robes, with the unconscious white child strained against her breast, and her heart leaping wildly as at every step the bangles clanked together on her brown ankles. The fierce hot sun poured down upon her head mercilessly from above, and the little green lizards darted away with lithe and sinuous motion at the fall of her naked dusky foot upon the staring grey line of the path behind them.

The woman was flying, though no one pursued her; flying with the stealthy, noiseless Indian tread, and looking back furtively over her dark shoulder with eager fear every now and again, to listen for the hoofs of approaching horses. But no one came; no one followed her: and she wound her way silently, alone, through the jungle, with the instinct of the serpent, and the light, unwearied, gliding motion of the Hindu race. The sun had reached the summit of the heaven now, and the sahibs at home would soon be thinking it time for tiffin.

She had risked all upon one desperate throw. If only she could return in time to escape detection!

Presently a little clearing in the thicket appeared, and the grimy path ended at last in front of a tiny, shabby, brick-built temple. Around it, the cleared area lay thick in dust, and the garish Indian sun glared hotter than ever on the crumbling plaster of that neglected shrine—the shrine of a hated and proscribed worship.

An old man crouched in the dust before the

door. He was a squalid old man, wrinkled and discoloured with age and filth; his matted white locks straggled wildly about his black forehead, and his lean ribs showed in visible outline through the dark skin that seemed to hang loose in folds around them. A few foul rags just covered his loins, and the rags and the man seemed almost to have grown together into one huddled mass by long companionship and ascetic filthiness. He did not lift his eyes as the woman approached, but went on staring vacantly at the temple before him, and repeating, in a low monotonous sing-song, the burden of a ghastly Hindu hymn to the terrible Kalee:

> "Oh, thou that delightest in fresh warm blood, in red blood, in the slaughter of thine enemies; girt round with skulls, we offer up to thee the heart of the victim."

An outcast dog that lay by the ascetic's side was munching away at an oddly-shaped bone. It was round and smooth, and bare at the top; on the sides some fragments of long black hair still clung to the horrid object. The dog pawed it and gnawed it with his teeth, and the shallow scalp, rolled in the dust, yet showed raw and hideous where his fangs had bared it. A vulture perched on top of the shrine; his beak was red, and his eyes closed stupidly in the broad sunshine.

The woman placed herself full in front of the beggar-priest, and with an imperious gesture of her soft round hand and arm, beckoned his

attention. The old man slowly rose at her bidding, shook off the dust from his back and shoulders, and stood, a tottering mass of bones and rags, a gaunt outline of fleshless humanity, bowed double almost to the ground, before her.

"Well?" he asked, enquiringly, in a shrill quaver. "What do you wish? Why have you come? What brings you here to-day, to the shrine of Kalee?"

The woman trembled, and drew back with awe at the uttered sound of that unspeakable name.

"See! see!" she cried, holding out the child at both arms' length, and quivering as she spoke. "I have brought you an offering—a votary for Kalee."

The old man peered at the child incredulously. His eyes were bleared and dim with sleeplessness.

"But this is an English baby," he said at last, after a long pause. "What is the use of bringing it here to us? The child will serve the gods of the Christians. Kalee needs no half-hearted votaries. The Black One is a jealous goddess indeed, visiting the neglect of the fathers on the children; and those who serve her must serve none other."

The woman gazed at him with wistful eyes. They were beautiful eyes—large, and soft, and dark, and tender.

"Girjee," she said, slowly, "it is not true. I know the child can be dedicated to Kalee. Listen to me, and I will tell you why I wish to

make her over to the greatest of the goddesses. She shall not serve the gods of the Christians. She is my child. I love her! I love her!"

The fakir smiled a horrible, lean, hungry smile.

"Then give her over willingly as a sacrifice to Kalee," he answered dryly.

The dog ceased from gnawing at the skull, and looked up in haste into the woman's eyes with eager expectation. The vulture shifted his perch uneasily.

"Not that! not that!" she cried, drawing back the child to her bosom in terror. "I give her to Kalee—freely, willingly—but as a worshipper, a votary, not as a sacrifice."

The fakir smiled with grim delight once more.

"Kalee will have victims and not votaries," he answered in his feeble, tremulous, senile quaver. "Give her, above all, the blood of her enemies. One sacrifice is worth many novices."

The ayah bowed down her face to the child's.

"Kalee is great," she cried, kissing it hard; "but I love the baby. She is very dear to me. I have nursed her at these breasts. She is like my own daughter. I love her better than I love Jumnee. See these dimples: she is smiling now. Kalee protect her! I love her! I love her!"

The dog returned to his bone, disappointed, once more, and licked the raw scalp all over afresh, cheated of his hope of another meal. The vulture blinked his eyes sleepily.

"Girjee," the woman went on again, with

trembling lips, "this is why I want to make her over to Kalee. They will take her away across the great black water, away to England, to the land of the Christians, far off from her foster-mother altogether. To-day the sahib said to his wife, 'Olga shall go soon to England.' I heard. I said to myself in my heart, 'They will rob me of my child, and she will love me no longer, and forget her foster-mother.' But if I make her over to-day to Kalee, though they teach her to love the gods of the Christians, the cold white gods that stand on pedestals in the public places, she will only be theirs during the waking hours of the white day-time; at night, in the black darkness, she will be mine—mine and Kalee's! Is it not so, brother?"

"It is so, Gungia. You have heard rightly. If a child be dedicated to one of our gods or goddesses of India, though she serve her own gods faithfully during the day, in her sleep she will be theirs for ever and ever. If you give the sahib's baby to Kalee, Kalee will watch over her in the dead of night, and be a bond of union between her and her foster-mother for all the incarnations."

"Then take her, Girjee! Make her over to Kalee!"

The old man squatted on the doorstep of the temple. "Do you know the penalty?" he asked; "the token of Kalee? The child made over to the great goddess, can never again close her eyelids in slumber. All night long she lies with her soul

spellbound, but her eyes staring wide open and fixed upon Kalee. The sahibs will see it: they will notice her eyes: they will know that the child has been given to the Black One."

"No matter," the woman cried eagerly; "they shall not rob me altogether of my pet, my darling. Though the great black water roll between us, she shall know me and love me in her sleep always."

Girjee rose once more from his seat, and, stretching out his gaunt and haggard arms, took the unconscious baby in his lean long fingers. At his touch the child awoke, and began to cry. The man dipped one skinny forefinger in the double gourd that hung by a string at his lank thigh, and touched little Olga's lip for a moment gently with some sweet white mixture. In a few minutes the child was asleep once more, and Girjee and the ayah turned solemnly to the brick-built temple.

The lintels were smeared with some reddish-brown colouring matter that bore a suspicious resemblance to stale blood. Within, a little bronze figure held up a row of seven small lamps, all alight, burning perpetually before the altar of Kalee. In the central shrine, a tiny black image of the awful goddess herself held the only niche; for Kalee, as the priest had said, is a jealous deity. Her lips were stained with fresh red blood. Kalee that day had drunk of her victim.

The priest motioned the ayah silently to his left. She stood beside him, her full round arms crossed reverently upon her half-open bosom: a beautiful

woman, in the purest type of Hindu beauty. The fakir, lean and skinny and wrinkled, took his place in his rags beside her, before the shrine of Kalee. The white child slumbered all unconscious in his hands. He laid her down in silence tenderly on the altar.

For a moment there was an awful hushed stillness. The priest bent his head slowly to the ground: the ayah allowed her own to fall in muttered prayer upon her bosom. Both with mute lips murmured beneath their breath the short litany of the great goddess Kalee.

Then the priest, taking Olga once more in his arms, cried aloud in a chanting monotone:

"Oh, Kalee, goddess of the Thugs, whose lips may only be steeped in human slaughter;
Oh, Kalee, goddess of the Thugs, who delightest in the hot red blood of the victim;
Oh, Kalee, goddess of the Thugs, who tearest the babe from the bosom of its mother;
Oh, thou Black One, thou fierce, thou terrible; oh, thou bloody-toothed; mighty and unspeakable;
Dark as the night; of mis-shapen eyes; crowned with the trident; riding on a tiger;
Horrible of horribles; Kalee the pitiless, whose fangs are red with the flesh of thy victims;
Take, we beseech thee, this child for thine own, and save her for ever from the gods of the English,
That she may worship Kalee her whole life long, and bring sacrifice to the Black One in her sleeping hours.
Though through the bright day, and while the sun shines, she worship the cold white gods of the Christians,

Yet in the dark night, and when the shadows fall,
may her eyes be ever open for Kalee:
Open for Kalee, goddess of the Thugs, whose lips are
steeped but in human slaughter;
Who delights in the warm red blood of the victim, and
tears the babe from the bosom of its mother."

As he spoke he swayed his lean body to and fro with horrible writhings, and, dipping his right hand in a bowl on the shrine, traced a trident with his skinny forefinger on the soft skin of the child's white forehead. The trident came out a deep scarlet. There was blood in the bowl: the fresh blood of a human victim.

The woman quivered at the awful sound and sight; but the lean priest smiled ecstatically. His blear eyes looked away vaguely into the dim distance. He saw but Kalee. He was lost in the worship of his hideous goddess.

There was silence again. Presently the man took from the altar once more a small dark object. It was a piece of flint, sharp and clear-cut. Girjee felt its thin edge carefully with his skinny finger.

"Keen, keen," he cried, "like tempered steel—the black dagger of the unspeakable Kalee!"

The ayah started, and laid her round hand eagerly upon his haggard arm.

"You will not hurt her!" she cried in terror.

Girjee pushed her back with a gesture of scorn.

"Kalee must needs be worshipped with blood," he said. "The child is at rest: she knows not

and feels not. Her body—her body only is here: her soul is away in the air with Kalee."

At the word he brought down the flint with dexterous gentleness at a particular spot, first on the right, then on the left temple. The child winced, and puckered its little forehead in its sleep, but did not wake. A small round drop of blood oozed slowly from the tiny severed vessel on either side. The priest dipped his finger solemnly in each, and smeared the blood on the lips of the goddess. He smeared it with deft sleight of hand, so as to produce a faint upward laughing curl at the corners of the black image's mouth.

"See!" he cried to the trembling ayah, "Kalee is pleased to accept the offering. The Black One smiles. She smiles on her votary."

The woman bowed her head in awe-struck assent.

"Kalee is great," she murmured. "All praise to Kalee, the swarthy fury, of a hideous countenance, dripping with gore, crowned with venomous snakes, hung round with a garland of skulls at her girdle! Kalee is great! Kalee is fierce! Kalee is terrible! Victory to Kalee!"

Girjee held up the child before the image for a second.

"Olga," he said aloud, for he had caught at the name, "I give you to Kalee. You are Kalee's now, henceforth and for ever. Though your waking hours belong to your own gods, in

the hours of your sleep you shall serve Kalee. Remember that Kalee delights in slaughter. Other gods are merciful and kindly and compassionate; but Kalee, the Black One, thirsts ever for the living blood of her victims." He hung a little silver image by a thread round her neck. "This is the badge that you belong to Kalee. Steep her lips in English blood, beyond the great black water, and Kalee will love you as her faithful votary. Milk and rice and oil we offer in propitiation to the other deities; but blood, blood alone, is the fitting food and proper drink for the thirsty lips and soul of Kalee."

He struck the altar thrice with his open palm. A tame snake glided noiselessly at the well-known summons from beneath the shrine. Girjee held it gently in his hand, and placed its speckled head against the baby's white forehead. The snake, protruding its forked tongue with rapid vibrations, licked the fresh blood greedily from the trident he had smeared there. When he gave the child back to the ayah's arms not a trace was left upon her face or forehead of that mystical ceremony. The woman turned and hurried from the door, crying out as she fled back, "Kalee, Kalee!"

And Olga Trevelyan was ever thenceforth the votary of Kalee.

CHAPTER I.

Persons and Places.

HORBOROUGH-ON-SEA ranks as the most paradoxically pleasant of all our minor English watering-places. Paradoxically pleasant I say, because in its exterior appearance there is really nothing on earth visible to make it seem so. A drained marsh stretches to the north of it: a drained marsh extends to the south of it: and a drained marsh merges on the west of it into low wild flats of bracken-covered common. To the east, of course, lies the German Ocean. The town itself—if town it can be called that town is none, but a mere long line of old-fashioned lodging-houses—occupies a petty stunted islet of dry land in the midst of so much unpicturesque marshiness. Nothing in Thorborough commands one's love. And yet everybody who has once been there, still would go; he knows not why, and asks not wherefore. The whole borough, like the chameleon of popular natural history, lives on air: for the air of Thorborough is most undeniable. To say it is bracing is to say too little. It exhilarates the heart of man (and woman) like the

best Sillery. People say to one another, with an apologetic smile, "Oh yes, of course, it's very ugly; but the air, you know—the air is really all that one comes for." Whenever a place has absolutely nothing else on earth to recommend it, you may look upon it as a foregone conclusion that it will infallibly plume itself on the purity of its atmosphere.

The little river Thore that drains the surrounding marshes, by the aid of windmills at the side sluices, runs into the sea at Thorborough Haven. There lie the fishing-smacks that keep the good folk of the town alive in winter, when they have no visitors to exploit (as men exploit a silver-mine), and no lodgers to drain of their gold, as in the summer months: and there the long-shore-men ply their mysterious trade of picking up an honest livelihood, in the off-season, by standing all day long with their hands in their pockets, and a short black clay stuck idly between their teeth for mute companionship. Around that mud-blocked Haven centres the slumbrous life of Thorborough, knowing but two alternative phases: in summer, pleasure-boats; in winter, bloaters. An ancient and a fish-like smell pervades the quay, where super-annuated mariners lean upon the old cannon, half-buried in the ground as posts, and survey mankind from their coigns of vantage in that broad spirit of generous impartiality begotten of long contact with danger and vicissitude.

Nobody (who is anybody) ever goes to Thor-

borough-on-Sea without getting to know Mrs. Hilary Tristram. Society at Thorborough sums itself up in her pleasant, cultivated, and hospitable person. Her house stands near the upper end of the Shell Path—the sole marine parade of Thorborough,—embowered by the only trees the place can boast, much blown on one side by the stern east winds of March and April. In the season, which lasts for six feverish weeks of August and September, Mrs. Hilary Tristram's expansive house teems with visitors. She descends upon Thorborough then from town, accompanied by a brilliant horde of followers—old men and matrons, young men and maidens,—and pervades the place, as long as she remains, with ubiquitous detachments of herself and her company.

"Olga," said Mrs. Hilary Tristram, at one of her biggest garden-parties, "allow me to introduce you to Mr. Alan Tennant. Mr. Tennant, this is my friend Miss Trevelyan. You've heard of her father, of course — Sir Everard Trevelyan — Commissioner of British Bhootan, and the eminent botanist? Ah! I thought so; I knew you'd remember him; you take *such* an interest in everything scientific."

Olga Trevelyan bowed slightly to the handsome young man her hostess had introduced to her. She was a beautiful girl, lithe and stately; a daughter of the gods, divinely tall and most divinely dark, with large soft eyes, and a lavish wealth of silky black hair that blew lightly about

her high white forehead. Something strange in those big brown eyes struck Alan Tennant at once as very unusual—a sort of falling droop of the lids and lashes that he had but once before observed in anyone. For reasons of his own Alan Tennant was profoundly interested in eyes and eyelashes.

"Do you live in Thorborough?" Olga asked, simply, raising the long lashes as she spoke with a sort of curious effort, and speaking in a sweetly musical voice; "or are you only a summer visitor down here, like all the rest of us?"

"A visitor," Alan Tennant answered, with a pleasant smile; "a bird of passage. I come, like everybody else, from the big ant-hill. A London doctor, in fact, out for my holiday. We work hard, you know, through the London season, and we're glad enough to get away now and then for a breath of fresh air and a little respite. We don't quite fulfil the apostolic precept, I'm afraid: we're often weary with well-doing."

"Ah! but it *is* well-doing, you know," Olga said, timidly. "It's almost the only profession, of course, where a man can be quite certain he's really and truly doing good. That must be a great consolation to you, after all, among the endless discomforts of a doctor's life."

"Mr. Tennant hasn't many discomforts," a pretty little girl at her side interrupted, briskly. "Have you, Mr. Tennant? He doesn't have to

run about at night and visit patients. Don't you recollect his name, Olga? He's the great oculist, you know; the famous oculist. He only has to sit at home in his own house, with a most imposing butler to open the door, and wait for people to pour in upon him and be cured immediately."

Olga's face coloured up slightly. "I beg your pardon," she said, with still more marked timidity. "I—I suppose it's very stupid of me not to know it; but one can't know *all* Mrs. Tristram's friends, can one, Norah? She seems to me to know half London."

"And the other half isn't worth knowing," Norah Bickersteth answered lightly.

The young doctor smiled once more. "Miss Bickersteth overrates my humble merits," he said with a careless disclaimer. "I can't pretend to be so very famous that not to know me argues oneself unknown. To recognise all Mrs. Tristram's acquaintances would be to pose as a walking edition of *Men of the Time*, with a bowing knowledge of all the bishops, judges, and painters in England. Nobody else ever expects to keep pace in that matter with your aunt, Miss Bickersteth."

Just as he spoke, the hostess herself came up once more, and, with an apologetic smile to Alan Tennant, turned gently to Olga Trevelyan.

"My dear," she said, "I 'm going to carry you off again, to introduce you to Lady Mackinnon. Sir Donald knows your papa in India, and they're

both of them just dying to make your acquaintance. Mr. Tennant, I see you're in my niece's hands: take care Mr. Tennant is introduced to everybody, Norah. This way, Olga, my dear: that's Lady Mackinnon, the dear ugly old lady on the chair over yonder, in the speckly dress and impossible bonnet."

"An Indian girl?" Alan Tennant asked interrogatively as she turned away.

"Yes, an Indian girl," Norah Bickersteth answered with a smile. "A great favourite of auntie's. Isn't she beautiful, Mr. Tennant? Isn't she delicious? Isn't she charming?"

"She *is* beautiful," the young man replied frankly. "Delicious and charming are epithets of maturer knowledge; but I can safely say at first sight, I don't know that I ever before saw anybody quite so beautiful."

"I'm so glad you think so. She's just a darling. We were at school together, you know, Olga and I, and I positively love her."

"You have every excuse," the young doctor answered pensively, glancing after Olga as she moved with lithe and graceful motion through the crowd on the terrace. "What exquisite eyes! It may, perhaps, be a professional instinct; but I think, Miss Bickersteth, a pair of lovely eyes really move me more than anything else in human beauty."

"Aren't they lovely! So soft and big!" And Norah Bickersteth lifted her own laughing little

blue ones to the young doctor's face. "They seem to have some strange fascination about them that I never saw in anybody else's!"

A military bachelor of sixty would promptly have responded, "That's because you've never seen your own;" but Alan Tennant was younger and wiser: he merely said, "Exactly, Miss Bickersteth; I quite agree with you."

"There's one very odd thing about them, too," Norah Bickersteth went on carelessly. "Isn't it funny? Olga always sleeps with her eyes open; she never shuts them day or night. You can't imagine anything so queer as it looks to see her sleeping with her eyes staring right up at the ceiling."

The young doctor pricked up his ears. "Dear me!" he said. "Are you sure of that? I noticed the lids had a very curious, unusual appearance. There seems to be a sort of falling droop about them, as though they half closed of themselves, and were hardly under full control of the muscles."

"Oh! I'm quite sure it's so, Mr. Tennant; I've seen it often. Olga and I sleep together, and you can never know whether she's awake or asleep until you've touched her, or roused her, or spoken to her, or something. She lies with her eyes wide open, and her eyeballs staring out blankly at nothing, as if she were looking at some invisible person ever so far away in the dim distance."

"She comes from India," Alan Tennant repeated, stroking his moustache with meditative

fingers. "Odd; very odd: most odd, certainly. I had once just such a case before—and that was from India too,—but he was a native: a terrible looking old man, with bushy eyebrows, who came over in the retinue of the Maharajah of somewhere-or-other unpronounceable. They said he had been a Thug in his youth. I could easily believe it: a fearful old wretch, with white moustaches and beard and whiskers, and a wicked leer about his bad old eyes, like a born murderer's."

"A Thug!" Norah said, shuddering slightly. "That's one of the dreadful strangling and murdering sect, isn't it?"

"Yes; a homicidal caste or sect or tribe, I think, who worship nobody but the goddess Kalee, I fancy they call her. They used to catch travellers by the roadside, strangle them and rob them, and offer their blood up in a bowl on the altar of their goddess. A very neat thing indeed in the way of religions! However, I believe that's all put down long ago now. Old Sir Donald Mackinnon there stamped the very last of it out; he tells the story himself at great length—something about some little forgotten jungle temple, and some awful creature of a mendicant priest—a hungry, half-starved, murderous ascetic, to whom the last of the Thugs used to bring the blood of their human victims. Capital title for a novel that—The Last of the Thugs. Don't mention the subject to Sir Donald, though, or he won't let you off under three hours and the minutest details. Nothing on

earth would induce him to forego a single item of all the horrors; he perfectly revels in human gore, as if he had caught it from the Thugs in person."

"Horrid old man! How very dreadful of him! But this Thug patient of yours—did he keep his eyes always open too, just like Olga Trevelyan?"

"Well, so they said; and, by Jove! when I came to examine him, it was certainly true. I found two tiny scars, one on each temple, most cleverly cut; the operator had severed a particular nerve which governs the opening and closing of the eyelids. No European surgeon could have done it more admirably. I made enquiries about it, but could learn nothing from the man himself; he was very reticent on the subject — afraid I should suspect him of complicity with Thuggee, as the Anglo-Indians call it, and perhaps get him hanged, as he richly deserved to be. However, I found out by asking elsewhere that this was a regular custom of the Thugs. Whenever any child was dedicated to Kalee, as was the case with every well-conducted Thug baby, the priest used to make a little incision on each side of the forehead, and offer a drop of its blood as a sacrifice to the goddess. At least, so he told the pious parents; but in reality, and that 's just the trick of it, he very cleverly cut the nerve that moves the erector muscles of the eyelid; and after that, the child could never close its eyes or open them wide, except with a distinct and unpleasant effort."

"Why, that 's just what 's the matter with dear

Olga!" the girl answered quickly. "She can only shut her eyes if she tries to on purpose."

"Ah! I dare say," the young doctor went on in an unconcerned tone. "In her case, no doubt, there's been some slight unintentional injury to the nerves, probably from disease, or perhaps congenital, and the eyelids refuse to obey the will except with a strong and deliberate effort. But these Thugs, of course, did it on purpose; it was a way of showing the power of the goddess. The priest tells them, if once a child is dedicated to Kalee, it will sleep for ever after with its eyes open. Kalee, it seems, is the goddess of blackness and darkness as well as of murder—murder being presumably a dark deed,—and so the votary of Kalee never shuts his eyes, but looks out for ever on the night and the goddess. A very interesting and poetical superstition!"

"And did you cure your Thug patient?"

"Oh! of course; cured him easily. Merely a question of cutting through another nerve—an inhibitory, they call it,—and the thing at once recovers its normal habit. In a case like the Thug's, I mean, that is to say: your friend Miss Trevelyan probably owes her peculiarity to disease, and that would be a far more difficult matter to tackle. I shall watch her closely now—only don't tell her so. She's very beautiful (which is always interesting), and this gives me a professional interest in her as well. But I shall watch her all the better if she doesn't know about it. I notice

that young ladies, when they know you're watching them, fail to exhibit that regularity of demeanour and unconsciousness of action which is indispensable to the medical mind."

Norah laughed. "I should think not," she said gaily. "How on earth can you expect us to be light and natural if we know you've got your searching eyes fixed firmly upon us for a scientific purpose?"

Alan Tennant certainly kept his searching eyes firmly fixed upon Olga Trevelyan all that afternoon. Wherever she moved, his keen gaze followed her. And he was vaguely aware in his own mind that his interest was something more than merely professional. He had achieved fame with extraordinary rapidity; but after all, a man can't live on fame alone: he requires some emotion a little more human to cheer and sustain him. At twenty-nine, men are still very human. And at twenty-one, women, for their part, are very attractive. Those were just the respective ages of Alan Tennant and Olga Trevelyan.

Once more in the course of the afternoon he had a few minutes' passing conversation with Olga. Norah Bickersteth took them round together, not perhaps quite by accident, to look at the ferns and bananas in the big conservatory. Olga's voice was sweet and low, and she spoke with a grave yet delightful earnestness that mightily took the fancy of the young doctor. "With a woman like

that," he thought seriously to himself, "a man might do some good in the world in his generation." He picked a superfluous blossom or two from the conservatory pots, without asking for leave, and fastened them together with a spray of maidenhair into two tiny dress-bouquets—red and white for Olga, yellow and blue for Norah. Then he handed them over to the two girls with not ungraceful old-fashioned politeness. Norah took her little bunch coquettishly, and stuck it at once between the opening of her bodice.

"I shall tell everybody," she said with her laughing voice, "that these were given me by the great Mr. Tennant."

But Olga held hers pensively in her hand, and hardly seemed to know whether or not she ought to wear them. Later in the day he saw she had pinned them daintily in her bosom, and he went away feeling the happier for it. To such absurd little flutters and tremors of that central vascular organ, the heart, is even the scientific breast at twenty-nine a willing victim.

CHAPTER II.

Kalee in Suffolk.

T was a wild and awful night, some evenings later, on the shore at Thorborough. The east wind was dashing the breakers fiercely upon the beach, a mere narrow barrier of cast-up shingle, that ill protected the long line of parade and lodging-houses in its rear from the fury of their onslaught. Sailors and coastguardsmen were gathered in little knots upon the Shell Path, eagerly watching the fishing-smacks that fought bravely for life against the teeth of the gale in their fierce endeavour to make the mouth of the tiny harbour. With scarcely a rag of sail up, in the face of that terrific tempest, one after another rode aloft upon the surf of the bar, and sank again invisible in the intervening troughs. One after another, dexterously steered by strong hands and stout hearts through spray and billows, made its way at last, groaning and creaking, into the haven of safety. The wind howled ominously through the slender rigging, and shrieked around the corners of the Thorborough houses. Anxious women, watching from the beach, wrung their

hands in terror and suspense as each well-known hull, driving half-helplessly ahead before the force of the gale, approached the long white battling breakers of the bar, and tossed about like a cock-boat on that yeasty turmoil of wandering waters. Strong men held their breath and strained their eyes to watch the fate of each in turn as it fought for life with terrible earnestness in that desperate struggle against the maddened elements.

But inside Mrs. Hilary Tristram's house, on the North Parade, nobody noticed the storm or its fury. Now and again, to be sure, the groaning of the wind, as it tore round the gables and shook the beams to their very foundations, disturbed a little the tone of the grand piano. But who thinks of wind or sea in a well-lighted room, full of guests and music, at ten in the evening? By two o'clock, to be sure, it is very different: then, when one lies awake alone in bed, the deep roar of the breakers as they crash upon the beach, and the wild cries of the wind as it rages among the chimney-stacks, absorb and engross and appal one's spirit. But, earlier in the evening, lights and company make all the difference. While the fisherwomen outside, but ten yards off, were wringing their hands, and straining their eyeballs to catch the dim outline of the tossing hulls by the faint glimmer of the long August twilight, Olga Trevelyan, in the drawing-room within, was singing a pretty English song; while Alan Tennant, leaning over the piano, was pretending sedulously to turn the music, which he

could only read by the aid of Olga's nod. Alan Tennant was always handsome, but in evening clothes he looked handsomer than ever; and the graceful attitudes into which he seemed naturally to throw himself added not a little to his manly beauty.

"How warm and cosy you all look in here!" the latest comer cried cheerily, as he entered the room to fetch his sister, a Thorborough native. "It 's an awful night outside with a vengeance, I can tell you. I never remember anything at Thorborough like it. You 'd better sit up all night, I should say, Mrs. Tristram, and be prepared with an ark to carry off your goods and chattels, in case of the deluge; for the sea 's dashing over the Shell Path like a young Niagara, and I expect half Thorborough 'll be washed away to the bottom of the ocean by to-morrow morning. Future generations of fishermen will earn a precarious livelihood by pointing out to future generations of London tourists on calm mornings the foundations of Mrs. Hilary Tristram's celebrated marine villa, under five fathoms of the North Sea."

"Is it really so very rough?" Olga asked in surprise, rising hastily from her seat at the piano. "You don't mean to say there 's any danger, is there?"

"Well, not exactly danger," the visitor answered, with a careless wave of the hand: "that is to say, at present, you know. I dare say Thorborough 'll weather the gale somehow till morning. You 're

pretty safe up at the north part here, though down below, at the poor end of the town, some cottages may really go squash before long. But the fisher people are in an awful way: the smacks are half of them out there still. What was that you were singing as I came in—wasn't it 'The harbour bar is moaning'?"

Olga blushed a deep crimson, and clasped her hands nervously as she answered, in a half-penitent voice, "Yes, it was: 'The Three Fishers.' I'm sorry I sang it. How terrible to think that while I've been singing about it so carelessly in here, the poor souls outside have been really living it and feeling it in grim earnest! Why, just listen now to the shrieking of the wind! How could we ever come to overlook it? I shall never forgive myself as long as I live for singing that song while the men have been working and the women weeping in stern reality so close beside me!"

"Only ten yards off," the young man of the town answered casually.

"Life is always very full of misery," Alan Tennant put in, endeavouring to relieve the poor girl's evidently genuine distress. "Nobody knows that better than we doctors do. We're accustomed, unhappily, to coming away from some bed of pain, and going right off, with a smiling face and a flower in our button-hole, into somebody's drawing-room, just as if we really thought life was all champagne and Italian opera. It's well for most of us that we don't always realise the full extent of the misery

around us: if we did, we should never be happy at all, and the world would be only a loser in the end by the destruction of so much innocent merriment. I don't think you have anything to reproach yourself with to-night, Miss Trevelyan."

"It wasn't a comic song, anyhow," the native ventured to suggest good-humouredly. "Very appropriate to the situation, I should have said, for my part."

"Ah, but when the misery comes so very near one!" Olga cried earnestly. "When one seems even to insult it to its face by one's untimely happiness! See—the blinds are up over yonder: the poor people on the Shell Path can look in upon us, all chatting and laughing and enjoying ourselves in here, with the red shades on the lamps and the bright dresses on the women; while they must be watching in fear and wretchedness and despair out there, wringing their hands and wiping their eyes, and praying for their sons and their fathers and their brothers! Oh, it's too awful! I can't bear to think of it! How terribly cruel and wicked we must seem to them! The least we can do is to shut out the light."

And as she spoke she moved gently to the window, and began pulling down the blinds that, with seaside freedom, had been left undrawn for the whole evening.

"You *did* look awfully jolly in here, certainly," the native murmured, with the air of a man who

makes a candid admission. "It must really have seemed just a little bit heartless."

Olga answered never a word. She was clearly too much distressed at the incongruity of their occupations to care for any more conversation.

"I think, Mr. Tennant," she said in a low voice, "I shall just go up to my own room. I can look out there upon the poor people on the beach outside. I wonder whether any of the sailors are lost? I shall never forgive myself: never, never!"

She touched his hand lightly with her own, and then glided unobtrusively, with a slight bow, from the room. Alan noticed that she singled him out, as it were, from the whole company for the sole honour of a farewell that evening. He noticed it, and felt once more that peculiar tremor—due, as he imagined, to a withdrawal of inhibitory nervous action from the muscles of the heart. (What a blessed thing it is to be a man of science!) But then, the next moment, he chilled himself by reflecting, on the other hand, that he was the only person in the whole room with whom she was just then and there engaged in conversation, and that she was evidently very anxious to quit the company as unostentatiously and quietly as possible. Anyhow, she was a very tender-hearted girl, and her conscience was reproaching her far too bitterly for a mere act of unconscious thoughtlessness, which she had amply shared with all the rest of the party. Alan liked her all the better for that, however. Earnest men are always attracted by

earnestness in women much more than by flippancy.

He went back soon to his hotel, and Mrs. Tristram's party broke up for the night. At the hotel, which lay at the south end of the town, Alan Tennant called for a brandy and soda, lit his cigar, and sat up reading a sensational novel of Gaboriau's late into the evening. He wanted to see if the smacks all got in safely; and from time to time he rose from his chair, leaned out of his window with his elbows on the frame, and enquired from the little knot of men below how the fishermen were faring through that terrible weather.

Human nature is very complex. Alan Tennant reflected somewhat remorsefully to himself that his main interest in the fishermen's fate was not for the sake of their wives and children (whom he did not know), but for the sake of Olga Trevelyan's tender conscience. "What would you have?" he thought to himself, puffing away reflectively at his big cigar. He had never seen the worthy fisher-folk. He *had* seen Olga Trevelyan. The smallest headache or heartache of those whom you know—and love—he thought it deliberately—is ten thousand times worse to you, rightly or wrongly, than the bitterest griefs of the vast unknown and unnumbered multitude. A child's cut finger affects his mother more than a famine in China or an earthquake in Peru. It must needs be so. How can you help it? The man you do not know is an abstract idea to you;

and you can't possibly sympathise to any profound extent with a mere abstraction.

By-and-by, a stir and noise on the beach below roused Alan dreamily from the terrors of Gaboriau. Something more real and serious was evidently afloat. Lights appeared on the foreshore beneath, and men were running eagerly about before him.

Alan put his head out of the window and called once more: "What 's up now? Anything wrong? Smack in danger?"

"No, sir," the coastguardsman answered with a loud shout, in a lull of the wind: "smacks are all in, the Lord be praised! Vessel in distress off the bar there. Seemingly collier. We're putting out lifeboat."

Alan rose and looked at his watch. Gaboriau had proved too wickedly enticing. The novel was a thrilling one. It was two in the morning.

He seized his hat and a light dust-coat, and hurried down to the front door. It stood open still: one or two of the guests were on their way to see the launch of the Thorborough lifeboat.

The boat was safely pushed through the surf, and began to make its way with toilsome lunges among the big billows. It was a moonlight night, in spite of the storm, and Alan could see the whole scene from where he stood, distinctly. A crowd was gathering opposite Mrs. Hilary Tristram's. The vessel lay there, a black hulk, driving helplessly before the gusts of that awful storm. Alan Tennant followed the rest of the world to the

scene of action. Only, for some reason best known to himself, he walked, not by the beach, but along the Shell Path, till he came to Mrs. Hilary Tristram's.

As he passed the house he looked up. All the windows were dark save one with a balcony. There, a candle burnt upon a table, and a huddled figure in a soft white wrap lay with its face buried in its arms inside the window. Whoever it was, he or she had evidently fallen asleep without undressing, perhaps after long watching at the window. Alan's heart beat fast and high. He wondered if that room was Olga Trevelyan's.

His hand fell for a moment to his side. The last time he had worn the dust-coat was to the theatre in London. His opera-glasses were still in his pocket. He took them out and focussed them on the vessel.

It was an awful sight. The bare black hull drifted, drifted, drifted hopelessly among the huge white breakers that roared and shivered and careered around her. She was a collier, no doubt, a heavily-laden collier, loaded down to the very verge of Plimsoll's line, and a rackety, unseaworthy tub at that—a coffin-ship of the worst type in fact, if ever there was one. Her masts and rigging were all long since torn away, and a bit of loose canvas, hastily fastened to the broken stump of the mainmast, alone carried her on before the raging tempest. One dark figure stood beside the stump; another, dimmer and harder to make out, still

grasped the tiller. The rest were gone: all washed overboard.

Presently the moonlight fell fuller upon her. Alan then saw by the shimmer of the rays that the shape by the stump was a tall man; but the other, huddled up in frantic terror at the helm, was the figure of a woman.

The lifeboat tugged and urged her course in vain. The storm was too fierce for her to make any definite headway against its overwhelming force. The man on the wreck beckoned them frantically on. Accustomed as he was to sights of pain, this sight of terror made Alan Tennant's blood curdle in his veins, and his breath seemed to fail heavily in his nostrils.

Next moment a huge breaker dashed over the hull. When the foam cleared away, and the black wreck reappeared for a second against the grey horizon on the crest of a wave, the man was gone. The woman alone, drenched and dripping, clung madly and desperately to the unbroken tiller. It was clear she was lashed there. They might yet save her.

The lifeboat drew a little nearer. Stroke after stroke, she gained upon the wreck. It was a neck-and-neck race, now, between death and the deliverers. Every heart within that watching crowd on shore stood still and waited as the light craft almost touched the broadside of the sinking vessel. Then a terrible billow burst upon her once more; the lifeboat bounded away like a cork

on the surface: and the wreck, foundering before their very eyes, sank to the bottom in a great round eddy.

As it sank the woman threw up her bare brown arms towards heaven in unspeakable horror. Every eye saw her for a second silhouetted black and awful against the moonlit sky: the next instant she was gone for ever. Not a sound rose above the roaring of the sea; but Alan Tennant, watching with his glass, seemed actually to behold in the expression of her face her wild death-scream of unutterable agony.

At that moment a strange noise burst suddenly and incongruously upon his startled ears—a noise audible even in the midst of that terrible turmoil: the loud and joyous laugh of a woman. It was no hysterical outburst of emotion at the ghastly sight: it was no uncontrollable explosion of feeling: it was simple laughter, merry and triumphant —the ecstatic pæan of a victorious player. The laughter seemed to mock the agonised death-throes of the drowning woman. There was something positively fiendish and inhuman in the reckless glee of that inopportune merriment.

What ghoul could thus insult the most frantic terror of dying humanity? What devilish joy could thus brutally obtrude itself upon the wrought-up feelings of those awe-struck spectators?

Alan Tennant turned to look. On the lighted balcony of Mrs. Hilary Tristram's house the window had been flung carelessly open, and a young girl,

in evening dress, a woollen wrap cast lightly round her shoulders, and a faded bouquet of red and white flowers held tight in her right hand, stood gazing out with big luminous eyes straight upon the blood-curdling scene before her. The girl was tall, and graceful, and beautiful: but in her proud face, lighted up by the solitary candle, appeared no tinge of sympathy or suspense or terror. She looked with calm eyes at the spot where the wreck had just foundered so awfully, and she laughed like a maniac at the horrible catastrophe; laughed, and laughed, and laughed again, with inextinguishable merriment, as though the sight of the drowning woman were to her unnatural soul the most amusing and delightful episode in all creation.

Alan Tennant stood there spell-bound. The girl in evening dress was Olga Trevelyan!

CHAPTER III.

Second Thoughts.

FOR a minute or two he could neither move nor speak: the jar of that horrid unearthly laughter bursting upon him at so solemn a juncture had too wholly unmanned him for word or motion. His head swam. He merely steadied himself feebly with his hand on the broken windlass that stood, gaunt and rusty, upon the bare beach, and gazed up, horror-struck, at the balcony window.

Then, slowly, his senses came to him again, and his professional instinct got the better once more of his half-superstitious awe and amazement. Gaboriau and the terrible scene before him combined must have conspired to deprive him for a moment of his wonted calmness. The weird sight had temporarily overcome him: but now, with a sudden effort of will, he faced and explained to himself the whole mystery. Olga, his beautiful, tender Olga—(he would call her so still!)—could never knowingly have laughed like that at so awful an episode. He remembered at once what Norah had told him. Olga slept always with her eyes open. Clearly—clearly, she was

asleep now! That must be the explanation of her seeming callousness. Callousness? Nay, rather, if she were really awake, devilish exultation at a fellow-creature's dying agony.

He cast his eyes nervously towards the beach. Had any of the crowd observed or overheard his beautiful Olga? Thank heaven! No, not a soul of them anywhere! They were all too absorbed with the incident of the wreck to think of watching Mrs. Tristram's windows. They were eagerly following the half-overpowered lifeboat in its despairing struggle to return shoreward from its vain and fruitless errand of mercy. No eye or ear on earth save his own had noted in any way that appalling interlude of unconscious laughter. No living soul but himself knew anything about it; and he—he could never misunderstand or distrust in any way his beautiful Olga.

He hated himself for having, even for one second, seemed to doubt her.

For like a flash of lightning, at that supreme moment, the truth had forced itself with startling vividness upon Alan Tennant's wavering soul, that he was profoundly in love with Olga Trevelyan.

He knew he loved her. He was certain he loved her. The very force and intensity of his momentary revulsion, when for one brief space of time he imagined the laughter was really wrung from her by that awful sight, in itself revealed to him the depth and reality of his new-born passion. It was long past midnight, and in those deepest

hours of the waning night the heart of man knows itself with more profound intensity than ever elsewhere. Alan Tennant knew now without a shadow of doubt that he was desperately in love with Olga Trevelyan.

He grasped his opera-glass feverishly in his hand. The last time he used it was at the theatre in London. And the opera that night—ha—it was *La Sonnambula!* The coincidence gave him a pregnant hint at once. Olga Trevelyan must clearly be a somnambulist!

He levelled the glass at the window once more. Olga stood gazing out tranquilly still, with sparkling eyes, directed now at him, and now at the spot where the ship had just foundered. Already Alan had almost forgotten the terror of the wreck. His whole interest and anxiety centred now on this deadly mystery of Olga's proceedings.

"My darling!" he murmured to himself, half below his breath. "My darling! My darling! She shouldn't expose herself at night like that, even in August! The cold will hurt her: it will chill her blood. Shall I call them up, and tell them to wake her?"

A dark figure stood unseen behind him: hidden from his sight by the windlass on the beach. The dark figure was watching too—watching them both—with a strange and half-superstitious eagerness. It was Sir Donald Mackinnon, the retired Anglo-Indian, who had brought down his yacht, and leased the Manor House at Thorborough for the

season. A weird fancy seemed to chain him to the spot. He cast his eyes from Alan to Olga, and from Olga to Alan, in alternate scrutiny.

Alan gazed still at the balcony window, in doubt what action he should take to recall her once more to her senses.

Just at that moment, a white shape, dimly seen in the room behind, glided with noiseless feet across the floor, and putting forth a soft fair hand, with a bangle gleaming on the wrist, caught Olga's arm just below the shoulder, and pulled her gently from the open balcony. A curtain screened the shape from fuller view, but Alan Tennant knew intuitively that it was Norah Bickersteth.

With a sudden cry, Olga started in alarm and flung up her hands—flung them up, as Alan noticed half-unconsciously in the haste of the moment, exactly as the woman lashed to the wreck had flung up hers to the heavens above in her last death-throes.

Sir Donald Mackinnon, unseen behind, noted the coincidence as eagerly as Alan did.

There was an instantaneous flurry and excitement in the house, a ringing of bells and lighting of candles, as Alan judged by the glare at the upper windows; and then the front door opened suddenly, and a manservant, half-dressed and loosely muffled round the throat, came out in haste, as if sent at full speed in search of a doctor.

"Anything the matter?" Alan cried, coming up to him hurriedly.

"Miss Trevelyan's took ill, sir," the man answered with a start. "Had a fit or something. I'm going for Dr. Hazleby."

"Go quickly," Alan said with an eager heart. "But it'll be some time before you can get him up: he sleeps soundly. I'm a medical man myself. In such an emergency, I think it would be no breach of etiquette if I were to watch Miss Trevelyan until he comes to see her. Every minute's precious in cases like this. I'll go into the house at once and see her."

He walked to the door and rang the bell. Mrs. Hilary Tristram herself (in a becoming dressing-gown and mob-cap—nobody ever took Mrs. Hilary Tristram at a disadvantage) opened the door for him in much agitation.

"Oh, Mr. Tennant," she cried, "I'm so glad you've come. What late hours you must keep, to be sure! Naughty man: ruining your constitution. Poor Olga's had *such* a dreadful turn! She was sleeping in Norah's room, as usual; and when they went up to bed, you know, Olga *would* sit up and watch the waves —she's *so* sentimental! And she said perhaps the fishermen would be drowned. Poor souls! but then, I suppose they're used to it. Been accustomed to drowning all their lives, of course; though I know it's only once fatal. Well, Norah went to bed, like a sensible girl, and fell asleep:

but Olga sat up, watching by the window, and by-and-by, as might naturally be expected, she dozed off, with her arms on the table. In time, it seems, she got up, still fast asleep,—I 'd no idea the poor child was a somnambulist,—and opened the window, and stepped on to the balcony. There she stood, catching her death of cold, heaven knows how long, till Norah happened to wake with a start, and found her laughing, positively laughing—in her sleep, you understand—at the top of her voice too! Norah crept out and touched her with her hand, and the poor child she just sprang back, and screamed and fainted. I 've sent for Dr. Hazleby, who lives quite near; but, meanwhile, perhaps you 'd like to go up yourself and see her."

Alan followed her, without a word, into the room where Olga was lying on a sofa, still dressed in her evening dress, and grasping in her hand—his heart beat fast—the little bouquet he himself had given her!

She was very white and cold and pallid. He felt her pulse: it beat feebly. Clearly she had just passed through some nervous crisis, which had left her weak, and weary, and flaccid. He had seen a good deal of hospital practice before an almost accidental success in a critical operation had brought him name and fame as an oculist; and he recognised at once, from Olga's condition, that the crisis must have been a very severe one.

Her face was turned to the sofa-back as she lay.

Alan took her head gently and reverently in his hands, and turned it towards him. As he did so he gave a little involuntary start: the eyes were staring wide and open.

He knew it before. He fully expected it. And yet the sight of that vacant stare—not fixed on anything near or earthly, but gazing intent, with rigid pupils, as on some terrible object at an infinite distance—alarmed and appalled him in some mysterious manner.

"Olga! Olga!" he half whispered in his dismay. Then, recollecting himself hastily, he said aloud, "Miss Trevelyan! Miss Trevelyan!"

Olga lay as motionless as a corpse, and never turned or seemed to hear him.

The young man leant over her closely and watched her face. Round her neck a little silver image hung by a silken thread: Indian work: he scarcely noticed it. The corners of her mouth were pinched and firm. The nostrils, still distended a little, showed signs by their tremor of recent violent passion. The eyelids hardly quivered perceptibly. The pupils were dilated and very brilliant.

What made the eyelids keep unclosed? The young doctor examined them narrowly. Defective nourishment, or some accidental lesion of the nerve supplied to the elevator muscle. From what cause? . . . Great heaven! how he started! . . . Close to the corner of either temple his quick eye detected at once a tiny scar—a very tiny scar—a long-healed cicatrix, almost invisible.

Those two small marks must have been produced when Olga herself was quite a baby. The line remained, scored deep in the skin, exactly like the scar of vaccination. They were not accidental: that much was certain. No accident on earth could possibly have severed both nerves alike on either side with such admirable dexterity. They had been cut on purpose; and not with a knife either. Alan Tennant's quick, experienced senses recognised in a second the distinctive broad-cut scar of a piece of glass or a stone implement. Steel and the metals generally cut deeper and clearer, with a fainter cicatrix.

Precisely the same scars, and in precisely the same spot, as in the case of his one Thug patient!

How very strange, how more than strange, that Olga Trevelyan too, like the Thug himself, should have come from India!

However, this was no time for idle speculation. Olga was ill. Olga was in danger. Too hasty an awakening from the somnambulist state had been followed, as usual, by collapse and possible utter prostration. Unless restoratives were applied at once, the action of the heart might cease altogether.

"You ought not to have waked her," he said, gently, to Norah. "In future take care, when you see her like that, you never wake her; or at least, only very gradually, if absolutely indispensable. The sudden recall to intermittent consciousness might easily prove fatal. Brandy at once, please; brandy and sal-volatile."

They brought them in haste, and Alan poured a glassful quickly down the poor girl's throat. After a little while she revived somewhat, and feebly held up the faded flowers.

"Oh, Norah!" she murmured, half below her breath, her eyes meanwhile coming back to earth with a gradual return from the abysses of infinity; "I 've had such a terrible, terrible dream. . . . A ghastly dream! . . . But I 'm sure I don't know what on earth it was about. . . . I was laughing, laughing, laughing so hard. . . . I can't remember most of my dream, but just the end. I thought——" and she looked at the flowers dreamily: "I thought I saw Mr. Alan Tennant."

Alan's heart leaped up in his breast. It was too terrible . . . or too delightful. Had she really seen him with her staring wide eyes? Then if so, she must have seen, too, that awful episode. Or had she merely been dreaming a maiden's dream about him? Then if so, at that his very heart within him was reverently silent.

He dropped the hand whose pulse he was slowly counting, and glided from the room, unseen by Olga. He could never let her know he had possibly surprised even so much (if anything) of her heart's vague imaginings. It would be cruel and unfair to her—a mean advantage. He beckoned Norah and Mrs. Tristram silently from the room. They left Olga for the minute in charge of the servants.

"I'll go below till Dr. Hazleby comes," he said, "in case I should be needed. Meanwhile, go on giving her the brandy frequently. But don't let her know I've seen her at all. Poor child! it might make her feel awkward with me afterward."

Norah smiled a knowing little smile. "Very well," she said, with a meaning look. "We can keep our own counsel, you may be sure, Mr. Tennant. . . . But how strange you should happen to be so near at hand just at the very moment when dear Olga wanted you! Quite in the Romeo and Juliet style, you know. A serenade by midnight—without the music. It strikes me, Mr. Tennant, you must have been taking a moonlight stroll very late, right under Olga's window too, for a wonder!"

Alan drew himself up shortly. "I was out," he said, "watching the lifeboat, which had just put off to assist a wreck. The wreck went down exactly opposite your aunt's windows. It was a terrible sight, indeed, Miss Bickersteth; the most terrible, save one, I ever beheld in all my life. . . . Miss Trevelyan is in a very excited and nervous condition. She's a young lady whose nerves should not be overwrought. If possible, keep the facts about the wreck from her. In her present state, I'm afraid they might do her serious injury."

"He's very much in love," Norah whispered to her aunt as they went back to the sick-room again. "He doesn't like to be teased about her. When a

man doesn't like to be teased about a pretty girl, you may be fairly sure there 's something serious in it."

Alan slipped down to the dimly-lighted drawing-room, and waiting there patiently till Dr. Hazleby arrived, briefly explained what he had seen and heard, and waited for his final verdict. In a few minutes Dr. Hazleby came down again, with his heavy tread resounding on the staircase, and reported the patient as distinctly better.

"She doesn't know you 've seen her, I gather," he said brusquely.

"No," Alan answered with some hesitation. "I hope you didn't mention it?"

"I didn't," the country doctor replied, taking up his hat. "And as I was walking down the stairs I heard her say to Mrs. Tristram—admirable woman, Mrs. Tristram—'For heaven's sake, don't mention a word of all this to Mr. Tennant.' So you see, my dear sir, you mustn't be supposed to know anything about it. Don't tell the young lady you saw her at all. She 's a poor, nervous, weak-minded creature!"

There 's nothing on earth more exasperating to a well-balanced masculine mind than the commonplace way in which other people discuss the characteristics of the admirable girl you yourself are profoundly in love with! They positively talk about her for all the world just the same as if she were any other fellow's ordinary sweetheart!

CHAPTER IV.

Dream Faces.

T may be accepted as a general rule in life that everything always looks very different the next morning. As Alan Tennant sat by himself at his ten o'clock breakfast in the comfortable coffee-room of the Royal Alexandra (formerly the old White Lion) he reflected with his own mind that after all he too, as well as his patient, had been in a horribly overwrought condition the previous evening. Gaboriau, and brandy and soda, and three cigars, and the small hours of the night, and a violent storm, all piled one on top of the other, had evidently combined to make him that evening most absurdly and stupidly morbid and hysterical. But in his sober moments, a man of science ought not to give way to such weak romanticism. After all, what did the evening's horrors really amount to? There had been a wreck; and wrecks, at least, are unhappily common objects of the sea-shore in this favoured country. Then, in addition, Miss Trevelyan had had a slight turn of somnambulism. A turn of somnambulism, even if interfered with, is not a very serious or mysterious affair. Finally,

as to his ideas about Miss Trevelyan herself, why——

But no. That is a point on which even the man of science (especially at twenty-nine years of age) is by common consent allowed to be romantic. Alan Tennant said it outright to himself once more by broad daylight. He *was* in love with Olga Trevelyan.

All through his breakfast he was longing to know how she had borne last evening's shock. Had she really seen the episode of the wreck, and tortured it somehow into something utterly different in her dreaming consciousness? Would she vaguely remember it now she had come to herself again? Would somebody incautiously blurt out all about it, and so recall it with a terrible rush to her half-oblivious memory? He hoped not! He trusted not! But people are always so very imprudent. And in a little place like Thorborough, too, a wreck would surely be the talk of the town for the next fortnight. He wished he could manage to get her well out of it! The incident was one that might haunt and dog a sensitive nature like hers for months together!

At the risk of being thought too obtrusively solicitous, he had scribbled off a hasty pencil-note early in the morning to Mrs. Tristram:

"For heaven's sake, whatever you do, try to keep the news of the wreck from her."

Then, remembering himself, with a "Pshaw" and

a smile, he changed the last word carefully into "Miss Trevelyan," just as if he really thought there was only one *her* in the whole universe!

After breakfast he lighted his cigar,—tobacco was Alan Tennant's one weakness,—and strolled round to enquire about—well, about Olga. Why not frankly, in his own mind, say Olga? When a man is just beginning to fall in love, he feels himself quite a daring person if he ventures to call the object of his choice by her christian name in his unspoken thoughts even. He could only enquire about her: he mustn't ask to look at her. She wasn't his patient, but Dr. Hazleby's; and medical etiquette, that vast organised professional trades-unionism, effectually prevented him from asking to see her. But he could at least enquire. No harm in enquiring. Mrs. Tristram met him in the garden as he entered. Olga was very much better this morning, thank you; in fact, apparently, quite herself again. Dear child, she had just had a horrid fit of walking in her sleep, and been alarmed and frightened at her sudden waking; but this morning, after a night's rest and a good breakfast, she seemed as if nothing at all was the matter with her. Mrs. Tristram had sent her out with the girls and young men to stroll along the beach—looking for amber. She thought it would take their minds off last night's troubles. Amber was always thrown up upon the beach between Thorborough and Yarford after stormy weather. The big lump with the two large flies

in it on the drawing-room whatnot had been picked up after the great storm last November. The girls all wanted to go out amber-hunting. It was so amusing. Would Mr. Tennant walk that way and meet them?

A vague dread smote upon Alan's mind. They were sure to come upon some planks of the wreck then. The beach was certain to be covered with fragments. If so, it would be impossible any longer to conceal the truth from Olga.

He hurried off eagerly along the beach towards Yarford, walking on the narrow strip of sand for greater expedition, and scanning the shore for any indication of Mrs. Tristram's party.

Half a mile from Yarford Gap, he saw them in front of him, all closely intent, upon the edge of the beach at the point where the wet and matted seaweed had been tossed and left by the storm in its frenzy.

As he came up, Norah bowed to him with an arch little smile, as who should say, "I know your secret." Olga, prettier than ever in her blushes and her morning print, gave him her hand with a dainty reserve that thrilled straight to the young man's heart from the tips of her fingers. She was looking perfectly well and even rosy; and she held out a small round lump of rough amber with a smile of triumph, saying as she did so, "You see, Mr. Tennant, I 'm the only one, so far, whom the gods have favoured."

What was there about that pretty smile that

struck a cold chill for a second to Alan's heart? He hardly even knew himself: and yet, in some vague back-chamber of consciousness, he remembered to have seen it before—and shuddered. It was a smile of triumph—innocent triumph; but it smote him hard with an awful sense of imperfect recognition.

They walked along, homeward now, and Alan and Olga led the way: the rest, with little smiles and nods of wise observation, allowing them to head the tiny procession.

Olga talked charmingly and prettily. She really *was* the very sweetest girl Alan Tennant had ever come across. Her mood that morning was a trifle more girlish and less earnest than usual: she watched the big waves still tumbling on the beach with *naïf* delight, and seemed somehow happier and more thoroughly at home than Alan had ever yet seen her.

"All the fishermen got back quite safe at last, you know," she said with a light smile as she gazed at the huge breakers curling on the foreshore; "so one can admire the high sea with a clear conscience now. I love to watch it foaming like that, when I'm perfectly sure nobody's in any danger from it."

"It *is* beautiful," Alan said, hurrying her on none the less. "Very beautiful. Just like a bit of Henry Moore. How exquisite the shimmer on their great crests as they curve and flash over on to the barrier of shingle! Do you paint, Miss Trevelyan?"

"Oh, yes. I 'm simply just wild about painting. I paint continually. Not sea, though, of course: sea is only for the great artists. Flowers, and cottages, and rustic children, and that sort of thing: the regular amateur subjects, you know."

"The fresh seaweed looks lovely in the sun, too, doesn't it?" Alan went on, carelessly, as they approached a great tangled mass near the high-water line. "Such delicate tints of brown and yellow, glistening wet. There 's nothing else in all nature like them."

"Nothing," Olga answered, turning over the matted fronds lightly with her parasol. "Why, Mr. Tennant, what on earth 's that? Just look: a woman's dress among the new seaweed!"

Before Alan could utter a word of warning, or divert her attention by some petty stratagem, she had turned up the mass that lay above the dress, and stood rooted to the ground, with eyes of horror wildly staring at the ghastly object that now fronted her on the foreshore.

A faint cry burst from her lips. Then in a moment she was suddenly and ominously silent.

The thing that gazed upon her awfully from the sands was a woman's face: a woman's face, battered and distorted, livid with long tossing and tumbling on the shore, bronzed with the sun, but now pale in death, and terribly ghastly. The body was lashed to a broken spar—the tiller of the coal vessel that went down in the storm before Alan Tennant's eyes the previous evening.

In his tender anxiety, the young man took her unconsciously by the arm, and tried to lead her away perforce from the sickening sight. But Olga could not be moved or distracted. She gazed with one long fixed stare at the face, mutilated and horrible, but still perfectly recognisable. Its eyes lay open, staring back at her own; staring through them, as it were, into dim infinity.

"Miss Trevelyan," Alan cried with a tone of authority, "you must come away: you must come home immediately. This is no fit sight for such as you. Leave us men to do all that is necessary. A wreck took place last night off the coast here at Thorborough, and this poor creature is one of the victims. We did not wish you to know anything about it: but now that you know, you must go home at once: you mustn't terrify yourself by looking at it any longer."

"It isn't that," Olga cried convulsively, finding tongue at last, and clutching at Norah, who had just come up, and was gazing awe-struck by her side at the pallid corpse: "it isn't that, but, oh, Norah! darling! . . . Mr. Tennant! Mr. Tennant, I know the face. . . . I'm sure I know it. I've seen it somewhere. I recollect it well. Oh, so vividly: with eyes staring open wide like that, and arms flung up—so—piteously to heaven. . . . Where could I have seen her? Oh, Norah, Norah! For heaven's sake tell me, where could I have seen her?"

And then, with a sudden burst of recollection, burying her face in her friend's hands, she cried aloud in a voice broken with horror, "It was last night! In my dream, Norah! And I thought—— Oh, heaven, I don't know what I thought. . . . But I never, never knew the poor soul was drowning!"

Alan Tennant took one arm tenderly. "Lift her up," he said to Norah's brother, young Harry Bickersteth. They lifted her up between them in their arms, and carried her, a listless, half-fainting burden, as far as the first bench on the walk outside the town. There Alan laid her gently down, and sent Harry for a fly to the Royal Alexandra, to drive her back to Mrs. Tristram's.

"She must have perfect quiet," he said in a tone of command to Norah. "This double shock is a terrible strain on so excitable a nature. Take her home and send for Dr. Hazleby. I must go back now and see after the body."

CHAPTER V.

A Soap Bubble.

AT twenty-one, nature is happily very elastic. Three weeks of quiet at Mrs. Hilary Tristram's seemed quite to restore Olga's shattered nerves: and Norah Bickersteth was certainly the very best nurse and companion in the world at such a time for such a patient. Norah's gaiety was beyond eclipse: and her lively talk and innocent merriment proved better for Olga than a thousand doctors. Indeed, one doctor, if unmarried and handsome, is often worth a great deal more than a full thousand. And Alan Tennant, looking in unprofessionally as often as politeness permitted, noticed with pleasure that Olga's temperament, though very subtle, possessed plastic powers of recuperation. "What a blessed thing it is to be young," he thought to himself. At twenty-nine, a man considers himself entitled to assume a middle-aged air and tone towards the foibles and follies of early adolescence. And yet twenty-nine itself is not very old. A man of twenty-nine has still a heart, and that heart is still capable at

times of a not wholly disagreeable fluttering palpitation.

Mrs. Hilary Tristram noticed, too, that Alan's visits were unnecessarily frequent. Last summer, she said, Mr. Tennant had been a perfect martyr to the royal game of golf: this year, the links were completely neglected, and the only manly amusement for which he seemed to retain the slightest taste was boating on the river. Now boating, as an acute intelligence will immediately perceive, is not a selfish or monopolist pleasure: in a boat, for example, you can carry passengers. Alan's boat, manned as a rule by himself and Harry Bickersteth, carried three or four inside: and among them were generally Olga and Norah, marshalled by that discreet and amiable chaperon, Mrs. Hilary Tristram. The mysterious game of golf does not readily lend itself to the softer pleasures of female society, or the practice of the innocent art of flirting. A boat, on the contrary, as everybody knows, forms one of the most harmless, even if necessarily space-restricted, meeting-places of the young, the gay, the giddy, and the thoughtless. That perhaps—though it is always rash to speculate on human motives—was the main reason why Alan Tennant had deserted golf and taken instead to an aquatic existence.

Mrs. Hilary Tristram was not unaware that Alan Tennant had "formed an attachment" (such is, I believe, the correct phrase for these earlier stages) towards Olga Trevelyan. On that point,

Mrs. Tristram wisely reserved judgment: or, to speak more correctly, assumed the attitude of a benevolent neutral. She would have wished, indeed, it had been dear Norah: Mr. Tennant was such an excellent, well-principled young man: but dear Norah was still very young, and a niece of Mrs. Hilary Tristram's need never fear the lack of fitting matrimonial opportunities in London society. One doubtful question alone remained—would Sir Everard Trevelyan, that stern civil servant, away over in Bhootan or whatever they called it, consider Mrs. Tristram had done right in allowing his daughter to contract an affection (correct phrase again) for the young oculist?

Of course, Mr. Tennant was a very distinguished coming man—extraordinarily distinguished for his age and profession—and sure to rise, and to be knighted and so forth, and really a very excellent catch—in these hard times, you know—for anybody below the rank of an earl's daughter. For it must at once be admitted, to put it bluntly, that a general tightness prevails in the marriage market. Husbands are not so abundant as they used to be a few years since, and when found, they are apt, like all other commodities when the demand exceeds the supply, to put a fancy price upon themselves. They give themselves airs, in short, and think hardly anybody good enough for them. Still your Indian magnate has often such an exaggerated idea of his own mightiness, that Mrs. Tristram scarcely knew whether Sir Everard

would approve of his daughter's marriage with a mere oculist—a common surgeon, you observe, not even physician! So she prudently abstained from overt recognition of this little affair, for good or for evil. It was not her fault, of course, if Mr. Tennant and dear Olga privately formed a mutual attachment for one another. She, at any rate, had done nothing in any way to throw the young people together or to promote an engagement.

And yet, need it be said that in her heart of hearts (so profound is the love of match-making among women) Mrs. Hilary Tristram would have been vastly disappointed if Alan Tennant had not proposed to Olga Trevelyan, or, having proposed, had been rejected by her?

At the end of three weeks, Sir Donald and Lady Mackinnon gave a picnic.

Lady Mackinnon's picnics were grandiose and Anglo-Indian. Sir Donald, like a canny Scot that he was, had married money. This money, originally accumulated by his respected father-in-law in the engrossing pursuit of the nimble quotation (as quotation is understood in Capel Court), enabled him to rent the Manor House at Thorborough, and support the dignity of a K.C.S.I. with a becoming degree of social munificence. The picnics attested and enforced that dignity. Sir Donald's steam yacht made its way solemnly up the river Thore to a convenient point, laden

with as many young men and maidens as it could conveniently hold; and there, standing aside from the main channel, under the shadow of the low sandstone cliff at Ponton, anchored seriously, with many premonitory puffs and snorts, for the discussion of luncheon. Everything was done decently and in order. The champagne was unexceptionably iced, and the table-cloth was spread on deck on an improvised table of polished boards and mock-rustic trestles. The lobster blushed ingenuous in silver dishes, and the salad smiled serenely complacent in a delicate bowl of Persian pottery. In short, the picnic was reduced as nearly to the level of a civilized dinner party as was possible under the circumstances of river yachting: and stewards and footmen did their level best to get rid of that delicious primitive simplicity which is the very breath of life and *raison d' être* of the genuine unsophisticated natural picnic.

Alan and Olga were among the bidden to this particular feast, as well, of course, as the remainder of Mrs. Hilary Tristram's expansive party. Norah was there, looking simply enchanting in a sweet little figured morning dress, and chatting away in her childish gaiety to all and sundry about everything and nothing. Alan stood talking to her long by the gunwale, peering at the herons fishing in the streams left by the ebbing tide, and listening to her charmingly *naïf* remarks about men and things and the universe generally. At last, a

more favoured youth absorbed her conversation, and Alan, strolling forward, came suddenly upon Olga, watching the water almost alone near the yacht's bow.

"What a delightful little person your friend Miss Bickersteth is," he said to her, with a smile. "She's been keeping us all amused over yonder this last half-hour with her funny little speeches."

"Yes, isn't she clever!" Olga cried enthusiastically. "And so pretty, too. And so delightfully natural. And such a sweet girl, Mr. Tennant, when you really get to know her. Not a bit spoiled by all the admiration she receives, though she lives so much in such great society! I'm so glad you admire her! She's my dearest friend in all the world. Just look at her now! Did you ever see anybody so perfectly graceful and so perfectly beautiful?"

"She's certainly very pretty," Alan answered, glancing across at her with an admiring eye. "Pretty rather than beautiful, I should say. Those *mignonne* figures are extremely charming, but not exactly what one calls beautiful."

"Oh, but prettiness after all is more than beauty, Mr. Tennant. It implies something. It's a speaking quality. It means they're good and true and sweet and lovable as well as merely pleasing objects for the eye to look at."

Alan nodded. "I'm glad you are so enthusiastic about her," he said warmly. He hated jealousy. It's a great point in a girl's favour

when she can be frankly enthusiastic over another girl's beauty.

Olga smiled a pretty little smile. She was pleased that Mr. Tennant admired her friend. Dear little Norah. Nobody on earth—except perhaps Mr. Tennant—was really and truly quite good enough for her.

A flower on an islet of mud in the side stream attracted for a passing moment Olga's attention.

"How curious!" she said, pointing to it with her fan; "I never saw it before. So light and feathery. It's a beautiful thing. I should love to paint it."

"It's peculiar to the Eastern counties," Alan said, at a glance. "I know it well. I've botanised it before now. I'll try to get you a bit one day for painting."

A small circumstance, unnoted at the time, but not uneventful. These small circumstances govern our lives for us.

Sir Donald came up as they stood and talked.

"Insufferable old bore!" Alan said to himself, with scant courtesy to his host—pardonable under the circumstances. "Can't he see I want to get a few words by myself with Miss Trevelyan?"

She was "Miss Trevelyan" to him still before others and in the white daytime: "Olga" only when he rehearsed afresh her slightest movements and speeches to himself at night in his own chamber.

"Fine view," Sir Donald said, pointing with a

broad sweep of his bronzed hand over the barren flats to east and west of them. "Beautiful prospect! Lovely weather!"

"It *is* beautiful in its way," Alan said, distractedly, gazing at the long flat banks of unrelieved mud on either hand, shining iridescent in the broad sunlight. "There 's a vast wealth of undiscovered beauty for the true artist in common mud. It lights up wonderfully now into cloth of gold and Tyrian purple. I saw Wyllie make an exquisite sketch of these very flats when I was boating here last summer. Do you think, Miss Trevelyan, you could ever paint them?"

"No," Olga answered, gazing at the glistening expanse dreamily. "It would take a great colourist to do it full justice. You 're quite right, Sir Donald. It 's really beautiful."

She turned her face up to him as she spoke, in the full glare of the August sun: and the old Indian, looking gently down at her, smiled with delight like a child for a moment at discovering that so intelligent and discerning a sense had been read by them both into his casual observation. It 's so delightful to find you 've made a brilliant remark without even yourself either knowing it or meaning it! The old man was pleased and gratified. Next instant, something unusual in Olga's face seemed strangely to attract and rivet his attention. He gazed at her closely, almost rudely, till Olga drew back a little abashed from his wondering stare. Then he gave a sudden backward jerk of his head,

muttered something inaudible below his moustache to himself, and remained silent for a few seconds.

At last he spoke: "You were born in India, I believe, my dear," he said, not unkindly.

But Olga evidently resented his manner. "I was, Sir Donald," she answered with some curtness.

"H'm," he repeated. "Born in India! Curious! Curious! One hardly understands it. But queer things will turn up sometimes. Queer place, India. Queer events often happen there. I knew your father, when I was in the service, my dear. Very odd thing happened to me once, in a district where your father was then stationed."

"Indeed!" Olga said with quiet dignity. She did not seem anxious to pursue the subject.

"Yes, Mr. Tennant," Sir Donald went on, turning round to the young doctor in his anxiety for a listener. "It must have been when this young lady here was in the nursery, I suppose; I came across one of the last remnants of that abominable Thuggee."

"I thought it was all put an end to long ago," Alan said with a suppressed yawn.

"Put an end to? Not a bit of it!" Sir Donald responded. "It lived on spasmodically till very lately. Why, in the Bengal famine of '66, in a temple of Kalee, only 150 miles up country from Calcutta, we found a boy with his throat cut; the eyes staring wide open; and the clotted tongue thrust out between the teeth:—a very horrible sight, I promise you. And in your father's dis-

trict, my dear, in your father's district, when you were a baby, almost, I came upon one very serious case of Thuggee. I had sat on the Thuggee commission, you know—helped to stamp the whole thing out—and so, of course, I knew all about it. Horrid practice that of the Thugs. They used to catch wayfaring victims, entice them to dine and then to sleep,—drugged, no doubt,—strangle them with a handkerchief as they slept on the ground, and offer up their blood to their goddess Kalee. But we stamped it out, stamped it out at last, sir, entirely. Beneficent rule of the British Government stamped out suttee, stamped out infanticide, stamped out Thuggee, stamped out everything."

"Except famine," Alan said, smiling. He was anxious now to divert the conversation; for he could see that Olga, in spite of an affected air of nonchalance, was eagerly drinking in the whole conversation, and he dreaded the effect upon her nervous constitution of so exciting a subject. He took, as he fancied, a sort of paternal interest in her.

"Except famine, to be sure," the old Anglo-Indian answered good-humouredly, refusing to follow the red rag so industriously trailed across the track of conversation. "Of course, we can't expect to put down famine. We're not answerable if the monsoon doesn't burst at the time it ought to do. Well, as I was telling you, I came across the last relic of Thuggee in the very district where this young lady—at the age of four, I sup-

pose—was then residing. In the midst of a jungle, a dense jungle, as impassable as a cactus thicket, we found a little dirty squalid temple—Thugs, if you please—all covered with blood, after their nasty fashion: and a lean old wretch of a fakir inside, squatting on his haunches, huddled in his rags, and actually taken in the very act of cutting up a dead body. I give you my word of honour for it, my dear young lady, with a flint knife, cutting up and mutilating a dead body."

Sir Donald paused and wiped his glasses significantly. Olga shuddered visibly as he gazed hard at her.

"And what became of the old man?" she asked, looking up in his face once more with a strange interest.

"Oh, the old man! Hanged him, of course: hanged him: hanged him. He was caught red-handed, and we naturally hanged him. Girjee was the old wretch's name, I remember. Died hard, with the rope round his neck, cursing us all in the name of Kalee, and predicting all sorts of hideous vengeance in the future against us. Gave your father quite a turn, the old fellow was so perfectly sure Kalee would avenge his execution on Sir Everard himself and his children's children."

"It was very dreadful," Olga said, shuddering.

"My dear," the old Indian asked, turning suddenly upon her, "do you happen to speak any Hindustani?"

"I did once," Olga answered, with a faint blush, "but I've forgotten it all ages ago. Only, sometimes in my sleep, a little of it seems still to come back faintly to me."

He looked her hard in the face with a critical gaze. Olga shrank half alarmed from his enquiring eyes.

"H'm?" he said again, glancing casually at her neck. "What's that you've got there? Eh? Tell me! A piece of Indian silver-work, isn't it?"

"Yes," Olga replied, fingering the image nervously. "A present from my old ayah at Moozuffernugger. I wear it always, I'm sure I don't know why. I've grown accustomed to it. It's a sort of sentiment."

Just then, to Alan's unspeakable relief, Norah ran up to take her friend aft and consult her on some small point being eagerly debated by a little crowd in Sir Donald's cabin.

"A pretty girl," Sir Donald muttered confidentially to Alan, "but, by Jove, sir, I wouldn't take ten thousand pounds to be the man that marries her!"

"Perhaps not," Alan said shortly. "But happily you're not called upon to make the effort, and I don't think she'll have much difficulty in getting a husband in due time without offering such an extravagant figure."

"Ah, I dare say the fellow who marries her wouldn't find her out all at once: but he'd soon discover what was the matter after it was too late, I'm thinking, Mr. Tennant."

"Love is blind," Alan said oracularly.

"Aye, but marriage is just like yourself,—a great oculist," the old Anglo-Indian retorted laughing.

Alan answered nothing. He merely glanced after Olga's retreating figure with some little trepidation. Everything that in any way disturbed her mind was now to him a subject for sincere regret.

"She looks to me too beautiful and good to have anything on earth but goodness within her," he said at last, half thinking aloud.

Sir Donald started. "Eh," he said: "That's the way the wind blows, is it, then, Mr. Tennant? Take care what you do. You don't mean to say, young man, you're going yourself to marry that wild young lassie there, are you!"

"If I were," Alan answered evasively with quiet dignity, "it is probable I would take the young lady herself before anybody else into my confidence."

He walked aft to join Norah and Olga. As he reached their group Norah was just remarking something in a slight undertone about their excellent host.

"Oh, yes, he's a dear old man in his own way," she said smilingly; "but like all Highlanders, you know, he's terribly superstitious."

CHAPTER VI.

The Hero Emerges.

FTER lunch, the yacht had to wait two hours for the tide to serve before she could make her way back again in safety down the shrunken channel.

The river Thore, which debouches into the sea at Thorborough (good word, debouches: you will find it in the guide-book), is one of those sluggish tidal East Anglian rivers which meander along, with infinite twists and turns, for miles together through two illimitable boundary plains of festering mud-bank. At high tide, the estuary fills from side to side, and looks like a splendid wide-spread lake: at low water, it rather resembles a vast desert of unutterable slush, with a narrow thread of river trickling slowly down a hollow in its centre. Landing is impossible on either shore: deep banks of slime and ooze intercept your passage in every direction. You can only keep to the mid-channel, and wait till you come to the rare quays where an artificial landing-place has been duly provided by human means for your special convenience.

The afternoon seemed rather tame as they lay at anchor: so the two row-boats of the yacht were put under requisition, and most of the party went off together, rowed by the attendants, down the side streamlets. The big gig, manned by the two sailors, the footmen, and some of the young men, turned off in one direction to put up the herons on the great mud flats: in the smaller boat, Norah and her brother went with a couple of others to explore the water that ran down a tributary channel from the neighbouring paper mills. Olga complained of a little headache—the sun and the water, she said: and she stayed behind. Alan (oddly enough) preferred to stop with her. In a little while, they were left to themselves, not without the guilty connivance, it is to be feared, of Mrs. Hilary Tristram, who engaged Sir Donald and Lady Mackinnon in an elderly gossip all by themselves beside the companion ladder.

Olga and Alan leaned over the gunwale and talked their own talk confidentially alone, leaving the respected seniors to their private resources.

"Yes," Mrs. Hilary Tristram said with a confessing smile, in answer to some casual remark of Sir Donald's: "I know I am. I admit the impeachment. It's so pleasant to make young people happy. The difficulty is, nowadays, how to do it. There are so many good girls, and nice girls, and pretty girls, and clever girls, all over England, waiting to be married, and never a man

anywhere to marry them. Where are the men? All gone abroad—in the Army, in the Navy, in India, in the Colonies—wood-cutting in Canada, sheep-farming in New Zealand, tea-planting in Assam, sugar-boiling in Jamaica,—doing anything and everything on earth but what they ought to be—making love at their ease to the nice girls here at home in England. And the consequence is, the nice girls are left alone by themselves disconsolate. I really wish I could introduce a Universal British Empire Telephonic Matrimonial Agency, to bring the young people everywhere together. But as I can't, I 'm reduced to the sad necessity of inviting the miserable remnant of the men to meet the whole host of nice girls at dinners and dances."

"You 're a benefactor of humanity," Lady Mackinnon answered with a nod. "Or ought the right words to be benefactress of femininity?"

"I 'm not so sure about the young couple by the gunwale over yonder," Sir Donald interrupted, with a mysterious shake of his sagacious head. "I 'm not so sure of your benefaction there, do you know, Mrs. Tristram."

"Not so sure of Mr. Tennant, Sir Donald!" Mrs. Tristram cried, bridling up at once and arching her eyebrows suddenly. "Oh, I assure you, he 's a most charming young man, and so well principled too." (Ladies of Mrs. Tristram's age, it may be parenthetically observed, invariably attach a profound importance to those mystic entities

known as Principles.) "He'd be a most eligible husband for any good girl: I can't allow you to say a single word against my Mr. Tennant."

"It wasn't of *him* I was thinking, thank you," Sir Donald muttered dryly. "It wasn't of him. It was of the young lady."

"What? Olga! My dear Sir Donald, you must really excuse me, but Olga's one of my most particular favourites. The only doubt I had on my mind was whether my Mr. Tennant, nice as he is, was quite nice enough for dear Olga. I hesitated as to whether I ought to permit the young people to be thrown so very much together."

Sir Donald shrugged his shoulders slightly: that was a Celtic-Scotch trick which his Indian experiences had rather strengthened than otherwise.

"It's none of my business, I'm sure, my dear madam," he said shortly: "but you know I'm a Scotchman, and we Scotch are a trifle eerie. I have a wee bit of the second sight about me, myself; and I don't just like that young lady's eyes. I've seen something like them in India. . . No, no: I'm not going to tell you, for you'd only laugh at me: but I know this much, that if I were a young man I'd think twice before I put my fate, for better for worse, into such hands as Miss Olga Trevelyan's. She's a friend of yours, and I'll say nought against her: but if second sight counts for anything nowadays, I tell you there's mischief brewing ahead for Mr. Alan Tennant."

Mrs. Hilary Tristram traced a circle uneasily with her parasol on the deck.

"I 've had the good fortune to be born south of the Tweed, Sir Donald," she said at last, after an awkward pause, "so the second sight doesn't greatly trouble me."

But it did trouble her, for all that. Being a woman, and therefore impressionable, the mere suggestion of misfortune affected her happiness. She spent a sleepless night that memorable Wednesday, thinking over in her own soul by herself all possible evils that could ever be supposed to overshadow in the future Olga Trevelyan and Alan Tennant. Perhaps Sir Everard would be very angry, and then what a dreadful fuss she would get into for having encouraged this unfortunate love affair. The more she thought about it, the more nervous she grew. It 's an awful thing to undertake the rôle of earthly providence to two aspiring and grateful young lives!

Never suggest ill omens to a woman. You are raising more ghosts than all your philosophy can ever exorcise.

Meanwhile, Alan and Olga stood by the gunwale, looking over into the deep clear central stream that moved unsullied between its muddy banks, like a good woman in this wicked world of ours. The boat in which Norah and her party had taken their departure was winding its way slowly up a narrow channel, towards the low bridge some

two miles beyond the paper mill. Norah's bright crimson parasol, held open behind her head, made a capital mark to track their course by. Even when the boat itself lay half hidden by the tall mud banks, that brilliant patch of sunlit colour sufficed to reveal at once their exact progress up the tributary channel.

"Take my glass," Alan said, handing it to Olga. "One can see the whole course of the stream with it up as far as the paper mill, spread out just like a map from the deck here before us. How it twists and turns as it crawls along! I went up there wild-fowl shooting, I remember, last summer."

"I 'm sorry you shoot," Olga said, turning her deep brown eyes full upon him. "I suppose it 's very girlish and all that of me, but I hate bloodshed—even an animal's. Members of a great humane profession like yours, whose very mission it is to alleviate pain, ought surely to amuse themselves with something nobler and better than going wild-fowl shooting."

"You are right," Alan answered, converted in a moment from the error of his ways by the tender light in those beautiful eyes of hers. "Forgive the past. In future, Miss Trevelyan, I shall never handle a gun again."

There was a short pause, during which a few distinct words were wafted over towards them from the region of the quarter-deck.

"The Hindus," Sir Donald was saying in a loud voice, so loud that it broke in for a moment

on the young people's colloquy, "will never willingly injure any living creature, especially cows, bulls, or oxen. It's part of their religion. A confoundedly queer religion, I always thought it. Odd that the people who won't eat beefsteak or tread upon a cockroach should have invented the custom of burning their widows, practised infanticide, and winked at the abominable atrocities of Thuggee!"

"Sir Donald has really Thugs on the brain," Olga murmured smiling. "I've never yet once met him that he hasn't gone back over and over again to that same old subject. Where have they got to now, I wonder, Mr. Tennant? Can you see Norah anywhere?"

"Oh, yes. There's Miss Bickersteth's parasol by the beacon yonder. I've been watching it all the way along the stream ever since they started."

"I'm *so* glad, Mr. Tennant," Olga said with meaning. "She's a dear little soul, and she's well worth watching."

Alan Tennant felt a faint blush rise to his cheek, but he said nothing. Clearly, Olga was on the wrong tack: but the present moment, with Lady Mackinnon's eye-glass fixed stonily upon them, was not exactly the best opportunity for a candid explanation.

"They're getting to the bridge now," he said carelessly. "It's a nasty bridge, that: too low almost for a boat to get under. The . . . the duck-boat, you know—I allude merely to the sins

of the past by way of illustration—the duck-boat could just manage to escape it, but I don't suppose Miss Bickersteth's craft can possibly clear it. Lend me the glass a moment, please. Thanks. . . . Ah, yes: the water 's somewhat lower than usual to-day. They can just get under. . . . Why, now they 're stopping half-way through the bridge. Miss Bickersteth 's putting out a line, I fancy. Excuse me, Miss Trevelyan, if I trample again on your tenderest feelings, but I really think—yes, I 'm quite sure—she 's going to do a little fishing."

Olga laughed. "I 'm afraid I 'm not quite true there," she said, "to my own principles. You mustn't expect consistency in a woman. I confess I don't somehow feel as if fishing was really quite so bad as shooting. I wouldn't fish myself, of course, because I wouldn't willingly give pain to any living creature; but I don't feel called upon to be angry with dear Norah if she chooses to do it. For one thing, the fish don't seem quite so much alive, you know, as pheasants and partridges. I don't think they can feel anything like so keenly. And then, besides, one doesn't actually shed their blood, you see: they only choke and die, I suppose, poor creatures."

Once more Sir Donald's voice broke through to where they sat.

"Strangled them with a big silk handkerchief they called a roomal," he said impressively, "and offered them up as an expiatory sacrifice to their goddess Kalee."

"But what 's become of the Thugs themselves now?" Mrs. Tristram ventured languidly to ask with a faint smile. "They can't all be extinct, of course. They must be doing something or other."

"Ah, yes," Sir Donald replied, with a long, sagacious nod of his head. "Beneficent action of the British Government stamped out the Thugs, viewed as a caste, but left the survivors. They 're all now otherwise engaged—as professional poisoners!"

"Really, one may have too much of a good thing," Alan remarked, half beneath his breath, in answer to Olga's silent smile of amusement. "Even the Thugs, blood-curdling as they are, pall at last upon the twentieth repetition. And how very characteristic of our British tinkering! We stamp out infanticide—and substitute a famine: we stamp out the Thugs—and get professional poisoners! . . . Will you take the glasses again? What 's that upon the stream away above the bridge there? A flight of herons? or wild ducks, is it? Too white for either, I think! See, see, that long pale band upon the face of the stream yonder. It seems to be moving—moving rapidly."

"It 's water," Olga answered, scanning it closely with the glass. "Foam on the river. A sort of bore or big wave, like the one they sometimes get on the Severn. Only it seems to go the opposite way, down stream, you know, instead of upwards."

"Give me the glass," Alan cried in haste. "Let me see what it is! . . . By Jove, I thought so!

It 's the water coming down—coming down like mad. Oh, what shall we do! What shall we do for them! They 've opened the flood-gates at the sluice by the paper mill!"

"And Norah!" Olga cried, clasping her hands frantically. "Do they see it? Do they know it? Are they in any danger?"

"If the water catches them there," Alan answered at once, "it 'll rise to the level of the bridge above—it always does—I know it of old—and they 'll every one of them be drowned to a certainty. They won't be able to get their heads above water, because of the bridge, and they 'll be crushed in, as it were, between the boat and the timbers."

Olga started back in an agony of fear. "Oh, save her, save her, Mr. Tennant," she cried aloud in her terror.

"Who? what?" Sir Donald exclaimed, roused by her cry. Then, his experienced eye taking in at a glance the danger of the situation, as Alan pointed mutely with his hand to the low bridge and the rushing flood above it, he called aloud to the stoker below, the one other man left on board the yacht, "Quick, quick! The boat! the boat! Down with it immediately. We must put out this moment and warn them of the danger!"

"There isn't another boat aboard her, sir," the stoker answered with a gesture of despair, silently appreciating the difficulty in his turn. "They 're both out with the young gentlemen and ladies."

"Shout! Shout! Wave! Call to them! Whistle! Attract their attention!" Sir Donald cried hastily.

"There's no steam on," the stoker answered: "I've let the fire down. We can't whistle!"

They all raised their voices together in a loud halloo. Unhappily the wind was blowing against them. A waving of hands and beckoning of handkerchiefs, long repeated, proved equally ineffectual. Norah, sitting at her ease in the stern, with her parasol still needlessly open, and the low bridge half hiding her from their sight, blocked the view of all the others. They were too intent upon their fishing to look behind them. It seemed as though they must needs be swamped without hope of rescue by the onward rush of the approaching waters, and drowned in the boat, a perfect death-trap, as the projecting timbers must infallibly catch it and hold it tight with the first flood, while the surging waves rose around and filled it.

"Thank God, there's time still," Sir Donald cried aloud, the perspiration standing in great cold beads upon his bronzed forehead. "Though it's coming down fast, it has a long way, a very long way yet to go, and many turns to make, before it reaches them. Perhaps we may still succeed in attracting their attention. Perhaps they'll see it coming, themselves. How does the river twist beyond the bridge, William? If there's an open reach ahead, they'll notice the wave, and get well away before it's down upon them. Below

the bridge, they may get upset, but they can cling for dear life to the boat, anyhow. Do you know how the river runs, Tennant?"

Alan shook his head ominously. "There's a sharp turn, and high mud-banks, just above the bridge," he answered with a shudder. "They can't see it coming, even if they were looking, until it's close upon them: and besides, they're not looking: they're intent upon their fishing."

Mrs. Hilary Tristram burst into tears. "Oh, Norah, Norah!" she cried, piteously. "Sir Donald! Mr. Tennant! Save her! Save her!'

"There's only one way!" Olga cried, trembling, and pale as death, but quite firmly. "Somebody must swim out at once and warn them. A good swimmer would have time to do it. Can you swim, William?"

"Not a stroke, Miss, worse luck, to save my life, even."

Alan Tennant answered nothing, but pulled off his boots and coat in silence. He loosened his collar and flung it on the deck. Then he stepped resolutely on to the parapet of the gunwale. "I'm not an expert," he said, simply; "but perhaps I can manage it. It's a race against time, that's all. There may be just margin enough. Anyhow, a medical man's business is to save life at all hazards."

Olga held out her hand for a second, as if she would check him: then drew it back again irresolutely to her side. "Take care of the wave," she

cried in trembling accents; "don't let it swamp you. But save Norah! save Norah!"

Alan plunged at the word with a header into the stream, and swam with all his might and main across the main channel towards the little river. Tide had turned now, and that was in his favour. He was a powerful man, though not, as he said, an expert swimmer; and swimming just then, all for haste, as if for dear life, with one arm alternately held above the water—the best way for speed—he stemmed the stream with the flow on the very turn, and made rapid way with his vigorous impulses through the deep water. The eyes of the watchers followed him with eager suspense. It was an awful moment. The bridge and boat and red parasol stood out distinctly in the middle distance. The white wave, with its sea of waters behind, came steadily onward, advancing from up-stream towards those unconscious young folks in the light pleasure boat. And in front, breasting the water with the mad energy of despair, Alan Tennant's head and arms showed ever and anon between the half-burying mud-banks of the lesser river. Would he reach them in time?—that was the question. Would he get near enough to shout aloud, and be heard, and warn them? Oh, for a chance of raising their voices and making themselves noticed to call their attention! The wave was advancing, advancing, advancing! He would never reach them! He would never get near enough! It

was hopeless! hopeless! The wave was gaining on them!

The wind! The wind! That cruel wind! They could hear Norah's soft and musical laughter borne to their ears distinctly by the breeze, and yet their own loud cries, wafted the opposite way, were utterly unnoticed, unheeded, undreamt of!

At last Olga had a burst of inspiration.

"The gun! The gun!" she cried, pointing an eager finger to the little brass mortar that stood by the tiller.

They had none of them thought of it.

Fortunately it was loaded for the customary salute. Quick as lightning, the stoker had brought a live coal up on deck from the smouldering furnace, and hastily, tremulously, touched the priming: Boom!—the sound reverberated along the water. Down went the red parasol for a single moment, and the four young people in the boat beneath the bridge, startled by the report, looked round in surprise to see Alan's hand earnestly beckoning to them, and his arm raised in solemn warning well above the level of the surrounding water.

He was almost within earshot now, and gathering up all his voice for a supreme effort, he cried aloud in one wild shout, "Jump out on to the bridge, Harry! Floodgates opened!"

It was just in time. The three lads, taking in his meaning with the rapidity of instinct, pulled

the boat out, without touching the oars, by pushing at the timbers overhead, leaped on to the low wooden roadway of the bridge, and handed out Norah, in trembling haste, on to the place of safety. Even as they did so, and before they had time so much as to secure the boat, the flood burst upon them with a wild sweep from round the corner, raised the water in the channel to the level of the bridge, and bore down the skiff, tossed lightly bottom upward, on to the foaming summit of its mad forefront.

Norah was safe! So much Olga could clearly see from her post on deck: but Alan Tennant? On what an errand was this that she had so hastily sent him? The fierce flood swept madly onward still, gurgling and roaring like a winter torrent. It boiled and seethed and careered in its frenzy. Could he stem its force—he who was no expert swimmer—or would it drown and overwhelm him without chance of respite?

The high mud-bank on either side hid him now from their view in the narrow channel. They could only see the one white ridge of water where the pent-up flood rushed on rejoicing on its mad course seaward.

Olga stood and watched in breathless suspense. Next moment, in the midst of the great white wave, a solitary black object rose bobbing for a second. She saw what it was: Alan Tennant's head. In another instant—oh, agony! oh, horror! —the white wave swept on resistless, and the

black object in its midst, sinking from their view, was no longer visible.

Olga clasped her bloodless hands in terrible self-accusation. "Drowned, drowned!" she cried, in a voice of anguish: "Drowned after saving them! And it was I who sent him!"

They strained their eyes eagerly to watch for the reappearance of the head once more, as the white wave emerged at last from the muddy banks of the minor stream, and joined with a burst the main current of the Thore in the central channel. But no head was anywhere to be seen; and what was stranger still, no boat either. Had both been sucked under by the eddying flood, and would they only reappear again in the calm water a hundred yards or so lower down, where the Thore broadened out into a wide estuary?

As Olga strained and watched and wondered with bated breath, a sudden cry from Sir Donald made her turn her eyes further up the little tributary river, where the old Indian was pointing his thin forefinger. With an involuntary sigh of joy she recognised the reason. Alan had caught the drifting boat, and was clinging to its side, and pushing it up stream as well as he was able against the battling force of the released current!

In a minute or two more, as the first rage of the flood gradually subsided, he had righted the light boat, and was seated in it, and paddling his way (for the oars were gone) with a short foot-rest

which had luckily stuck in its rack in spite of the capsizing.

Stirring episodes occupy small space. In far less than a quarter of an hour from the time when he jumped overboard off the yacht's deck, Alan Tennant had reached the bridge, and was standing in safety by Norah's side.

Olga's heart, which had stood still within her while she watched and waited, bounded now with a wild tremor of delight. They were saved, saved! Both of them saved! Norah and—and Alan.

In that moment of agony, her heart, too, had confessed its own secret to itself. She knew she loved him! She was certain that she loved him!

CHAPTER VII.

Heroism Dry.

A HERO, it may be confidently asserted, is no hero at all in wet clothes. On the contrary, he is a wretched, dripping, bedraggled creature, suggestive rather of the need for immediate charity than of the praise and honour due to his tried heroism. Alan Tennant, though new to the rôle in this particular fashion at least (for every doctor is after all by profession a hero in his own way), so instinctively grasped at that obvious element in the theatrical recognition of the heroic character, that he abstained from returning to the yacht as he stood, and displaying himself before Olga's admiring eyes in his wet, torn, and muddy garments. This is as it should be. On the stage, indeed, the hero who has saved a beautiful lady from imminent drowning appears on deck immediately afterwards in spotless white shirt and blue nankin trousers, and has his hand warmly grasped by the lady's friends, or is even embraced bodily before an admiring circle by her grateful mother, her cousins, and her aunts. But then the stage hero comes up from the great deep dry and un-

hurt (even his hair is not put out of curl), as though water ran off him, by some occult arrangement, in the common fashion of the domestic duck. But in real life, unfortunately, the hero's head emerges from the wave distinctly disarranged; his collar is moist, limp and uncomfortable, and his clothes cling to him with most unpicturesque and unromantic tightness. Alan Tennant judged it best, therefore, to leave to the lads the task of paddling Norah back to her grateful chaperon: while he himself, dripping wet, coatless and hatless, ran back to Thorborough at the top of his speed by the nearest road without waiting for any theatrical reception. This was certainly not romantic heroism: but it was warmer and safer: and besides, what man cares to appear before the maiden of his choice, even as a hero, draped from head to foot in damp and dingy mud-bespattered clothing?

That evening, however, at half-past seven, the young doctor issued forth once more resplendent from his hotel, in black coat and white necktie, by special invitation to dine at Mrs. Hilary Tristram's, in his new character as Norah's preserver. A hero in evening clothes, now,—look you—why, that of course is quite another matter. When a man is tall and handsome and rejoices in the possession of a black moustache, there must certainly be something very wrong about him somewhere if he doesn't look, on due occasion given, every inch a hero, standing up by the fireplace, in a swallow-tail coat and white necktie.

Olga Trevelyan thought so indeed as she entered the drawing-room earliest of the party, and found Alan already there, looking none the worse in any way for his afternoon's adventure. In fact, if anything, he looked all the better: for every man's appearance is much improved in certain circumstances by a not ungraceful consciousness of having acquitted himself well and manfully under trying conditions.

Olga took his hand tremulously. He saw she had been crying: she had not quite succeeded after many efforts in obliterating the traces of it from her swollen eyelids. She said nothing, but held his hand nervously in hers for a moment with a sudden access of mute gratitude. She was too deeply moved to know precisely what she was doing. Thinking only of Norah's safety (and his), she held it long, and let it go reluctantly.

"Mr. Tennant," she said at last, in a trembling voice, "we can never, never, never sufficiently thank you. You have given us back our darling Norah. If it hadn't been for you, we should certainly have lost her. I won't try to tell you how much I admire you for it. It was splendidly done —I am glad in my heart I was there to see it."

Alan smiled and made light of it, of course. (It is part of the rôle of a hero, once more, you know, always to make light of the danger afterwards.) "Oh, it wasn't really a very long swim," he answered carelessly. "The only real difficulty was when that nasty wave came bursting over

one. I certainly did think then for a minute I should never live through it: and if I hadn't just happened to clutch at the boat as it passed on the crest of the ridge, I fancy I shouldn't have pulled through, either. But don't think," and here he lowered his voice a moment, "it was all pure devotion to duty, and saving life, and all that sort of thing. I'm not quite sure, Miss Trevelyan, that for anybody else I should ever have had the strength to do it."

Olga looked up at him with a delighted smile. "I'm glad to hear it," she said frankly. "Then I suppose to-night, of course, you'll seize the opportunity at once and propose to her. After that, she could never refuse you. . . . And you should just hear, Mr. Tennant, all the things she's been saying to me upstairs about you."

For a moment, Alan drew back in surprise. He could hardly understand what Olga meant by it. Then, as her misconception dawned slowly upon him, he took her hand, unresisted, gently in his own, and led her passive for a moment on to the lawn outside, through the open window.

"Miss Trevelyan," he said, very low and soft, "you don't understand me. I'm not sure that for any other woman on earth but you, I should have had strength to do it. But *you* asked me; *you* sent me: and if you had told me that moment to go to the world's end, I would gladly have done it. I will take your advice and seize the opportunity. Olga, Olga, I love you, I love you."

Olga stood away for a second in surprise. Then she lifted her big eyes slowly to his, and said in the same simple straightforward tone as before, "Why, Mr. Tennant,—I thought—I thought—I thought it was Norah."

Alan Tennant gazed at her with eyes of mingled admiration and amusement.

"Norah!" he cried. "Norah! Norah! Oh, no; oh, no; it wasn't Miss Bickersteth. Ask her, ask her: she knows better. She knows I love you. From the very first moment I ever saw you, I felt in my heart I could never love any lesser creature. And you will let me love you? You will let me love you?"

She paused a moment. "But Norah?" she said. "What about Norah?"

"Norah!" Alan cried, in an impassioned voice. "Norah! Norah! Oh, no: I never cared a pin for Norah! Norah knows I am in love with you, and expects me to tell you so! Olga, Olga, you will not refuse me! You will take me! You will take me!"

Her hero looked absolutely heroic then:—and besides, the five minutes just before dinner is a most cramped and awkward time to choose for such an interview. Olga's face blushed crimson for a moment—Mrs. Tristram would be down before she could get him back safe into the drawing-room: and everybody would notice it and read her secret! She paused again while a man might count ten, and looked at him hesitatingly with her beautiful big

eyes. Then she laid her hand once more in his for a brief second, and answered in an almost inaudible voice, "Yes, Mr. Tennant." Next instant, he was standing by himself on the grass, and Olga, crimson still and very tremulous, had run in by the front door, and hurried up again to her own bedroom.

They had to wait dinner full ten minutes for her; and when she came down once more, she looked flushed and agitated. But happily Alan, as the guest of the evening, did not sit beside her. He took down Mrs. Hilary Tristram, and had Norah (the preserved) on his left hand. That was a great comfort to poor Olga. To be sure, it was rather hard, just after such an interview as hers and Alan's, to engage spasmodically in the small-talk of society with the young dragoon who took her in to dinner: but at any rate it was better than if she had had to talk to Alan. That, under the circumstances, would have been *too* embarrassing.

Of course neither of them said anything to anybody about the little episode that had happened before dinner. But women have eyes whose keenness wonderfully puzzles us poor purblind men. As the ladies rose to go into the drawing-room, Norah slipped her arm round Olga's waist playfully in the hall, and whispered in her ear, "I'm *so* glad, darling. I knew he would. I was quite certain of it!" And Olga only blushed once more—she was sweet when she

blushed—and gave her pretty little friend's hand a silent squeeze with her burning fingers.

Of course the engagement was "not announced." Engagements of that informal and purely personal sort never are announced, until the consent of the superior authorities has been duly obtained. But they get whispered about unofficially for all that. And when Mrs. Hilary Tristram mentioned in confidence the very next day to Sir Donald Mackinnon that Norah had told her that Olga had as good as admitted that Alan Tennant had made her an offer, Sir Donald twirled his grey moustache and shook his heavy head ominously.

"Young bodies won't be warned," he said with a gloomy look of intense foreboding. "I was afraid of as much when yon lad spoke of her to me yesterday. People may laugh at the second-sight as much as they will, but I told you then—and you see it's coming true already—there was mischief brewing ahead for young Alan Tennant. The girl's a good lass, and a pretty lass, and a clever lass, and she means no evil: but there's a Thing within her, driving her on, that'll lead her into trouble when she least expects it."

CHAPTER VIII.

The Storm Gathers.

IME wore on. Alan Tennant's holiday was drawing to a close. Six weeks is a long rest for a busy and successful London specialist: and Alan Tennant had made the best of his, for himself and for Olga. A few days before he was to leave Thorborough, Norah Bickersteth happened to meet him on the Shell Path.

"Oh, I'm so glad I've knocked up against you, Mr. Tennant," she said with a sunny smile, holding out her pretty little gloved hand to him. "Auntie gave me a message for you to-day. You're going up the river with Harry, aren't you?"

"Yes," Alan answered. "We're going in the duck-boat—the *Indian Princess*, you know—just to let Harry have a general view of the prospects of the wild-fowl shooting."

"Well, auntie wants you to come in this evening, after dinner—you'll excuse our saying after dinner, won't you? Sir Donald's going to bring round Mr. Keen—the great mesmerist, you know, and thought-reader, and so forth: he does such won-

derful tricks, they say: and auntie wants you to come and see him, because you 're so clever, and you 'll understand all about it."

Alan smiled. "Oh, yes, I 'll come," he said. "Only Mrs. Tristram mustn't expect to find me very much of a believer in thought-reading and so forth. Is Mr. Keen stopping with Sir Donald? Ah, yes, I thought so. Sir Donald 's a Highlander, with Highland superstitions well ingrained in him, and a little improved (like good Madeira) by twenty years of India. But Miss Bickersteth, mind, there must be no mesmerising or thought-reading on any account with Olga." (He had seen a good deal of her since the trip on the yacht, and it had come to be plain "Olga" by this time.) "She isn't strong, and she 's had a great deal of nervous excitement to upset her lately, and she should be kept from anything that will excite her in any way. Tell Mrs. Tristram I shall be delighted to drop in. I mustn't keep you: Harry 's waiting for me with the boat down yonder at the Haven. Good morning. Till after dinner."

And he lifted his hat and walked away briskly.

That evening, Mrs. Hilary Tristram's informal party was larger than usual. Half the visitors at Thorborough had been invited to drop in for the purpose of seeing the celebrated mesmerist's extraordinary performance. Only Harry Bickersteth and Alan Tennant were still absent: delayed up the river, no doubt, by the turn of the tide, and

not to be looked for back again till late in the evening.

"It's very odd Alan doesn't turn up," Olga whispered uneasily in Norah's ear. "Ever since that trouble the other day with you, dear, I hate the river. It's so awfully dangerous. I wish he'd come: it quite frightens me."

"Oh, nonsense, darling," Norah answered with a smile. "Of course I know you're very anxious to see him. That's natural: I should be myself, I'm sure. But he's all right: don't be afraid. They'd come home late, and have dinner together in flannels, at the Royal Alexandra; and then they'd have to dress, you know; and they couldn't be here till a good deal later. Hush, hush: Mr. Keen's going to begin the mesmerism now. 'Observe, ladies and gentlemen, there's no deception.' You see he's rolling up his sleeves beforehand, just like a conjurer, in order to let us notice he hasn't got any ghosts or spirits or supernatural agents concealed anywhere in his cuffs or coat-lining. What funny thin hands—so strange and ghost-like."

There was a general hush, and the company drew up in a hasty circle, the ladies seated, the men standing behind their chairs, with a clear space for Mr. Keen and his "subjects" in the centre, where a solitary seat was placed for the person to be mesmerised.

"I will begin," Mr. Keen said, looking round him carelessly at the assembled company with the

bland smile of the practised performer, "I will begin first upon this young gentleman." He singled out a boy quickly from the group behind. "I see you 're susceptible. Stand forward, please. Take a seat there, will you? Now, look steadily into my eyes, my boy, and think about nothing until I tell you."

The boy took the seat where the mesmerist motioned him, and looked as requested deep into his eyes. After a few minutes, his eyelids dropped, and he began to fall back heavily in the chair.

The performer, with practised ease, put him rapidly through all the usual and well-known tricks by which the mesmerist is wont to show the abeyance of the will and the absolute acquiescence of the "subject" in his every suggestion.

"You 're a bird, aren't you?" Mr. Keen asked, addressing him authoritatively.

And the boy, with a nod of the head, began at once to flap his arms, run forward flightily, and behave as if he thought himself really flying.

"What are you?" the mesmerist asked in a coaxing voice.

"A bird," the boy answered with the instantaneous force of complete conviction.

"A bird?" dubiously.

"Well—I think so."

"No, not a bird! A bird! Ridiculous!"

The boy laughed. "No, not a *bird*," he said. "A bird! What nonsense."

"Of course not," the mesmerist went on con-

fidently. "You're a fish, you know. A fish, most decidedly."

The boy laughed once more a nervous laugh. "A fish," he repeated in a bewildered fashion, and throwing himself on the floor began to move his arms slowly and regularly, as if swimming with fins in a sluggish river.

"The stream runs fast," the mesmerist suggested.

The boy immediately quickened the movement, and seemed to be struggling in the violent effort to make headway against some unseen but overwhelming power.

"Do you believe in it?" Norah whispered in a low undertone to Olga.

"Not a bit," Olga answered, shaking her head. "The boy's shamming; that's my idea about it. It must be a preconcerted thing between them."

Low as she spoke, the mesmerist overheard her. "You shall try in your turn, young lady," he said severely, glancing at her with his great cold dull blue eyes—eyes that seemed totally devoid of all life or meaning. "You shall see for yourself before the evening's out whether there's anything in it or nothing."

Olga blushed, and remained silent.

"What's that?" the mesmerist cried to the boy suddenly, striking an attitude of attention and listening in surprise. "Do you hear? Do you hear it?"

The boy jumped up immediately from the floor,

and stood looking about him and turning his head, first this way, then that, as if straining his ear for some distant sound or other.

"You *must* hear it," the mesmerist said in a half-angry voice. "It 's quite distinct. Listen! What is it?"

"I *hear* it," the boy answered. "I hear it, of course, right enough. But I can't make out exactly what it is, for the life of me, somehow."

"Bells," the mesmerist suggested with confidence.

"Ah," the boy assented. "So it is. Chimes, by Jingo." And he beat time in a jangling sing-song with his hand to the quick lilt of the imaginary music.

"It 's the cathedral," the mesmerist cried, seizing his arm suddenly. "Let 's go inside. What a glorious anthem! By George, it 's splendid! I do love to hear the pealing of the organ."

The boy answered nothing, but stood entranced, listening with all his ears to the unheard sounds, and smiling with a face of glowing delight at the inaudible melody.

"Pah," the mesmerist muttered after a minute's pause: "a false note! The fellow plays badly. Inexcusable, quite. The dean and chapter ought really to keep a better organist."

The boy set his teeth on edge at once and drew up his lips with a pained expression, as we all do instinctively at the sound of a discord in the midst of music.

"If it's acting," Mrs. Tristram whispered low to Olga, "it's consummate acting. Perfectly consummate. I don't think Charlie Meredith has got it in him."

"Let us take another subject," the mesmerist said quietly, making a few rapid passes, and releasing the boy. "Will you try, Miss Bickersteth? Thanks. How very good of you. Everybody will know"—with a glance at Olga—"that you at least are above suspicion."

Norah walked out timidly into the centre, and took her place, blushing, on the experimenter's chair. In a few minutes, she too was asleep, and doing at once all the mesmerist's bidding.

"Take this cup," Mr. Keen said, handing the girl a lacquered Japanese bowl from the little whatnot. "There, drink it off, that's a good girl. It's very nasty, but you mustn't mind it. It's to do you good! Dr. Hazleby's orders!"

Norah drained off the imaginary draught, and made a most comical wry face after it. "It's very bitter," she said. "I don't like it. Please don't make me take any more of it, will you, auntie?"

"Oh, no," the mesmerist responded promptly, glancing round with a look of triumph at Olga. "Here, have a cup of coffee to take the taste away." And he handed her back the self-same bowl with a little mocking bow of pretended politeness.

Norah took it and emptied it (in imagination) once more. "It's very nice coffee," she said. "Excellent coffee. I'll take another cup of that coffee, thank you."

"Let Mr. Keen try with you, Olga dear," Mrs. Hilary Tristram suggested gently, turning to her. "Don't wake up Norah yet, Mr. Keen. Let's have a little comedy of two together."

"Oh, please not," Olga cried, shrinking timidly back from the performer's hands, as he took her fingers gently in his. "I don't know whether——" and then she checked herself with a sudden blush. . . . She didn't know whether Alan would approve of it.

Norah could have said her nay at once had Norah been awake: but Norah sat in the chair silent, bound body and soul in a deathlike trance by the art of the mesmerist.

Mr. Keen, however, had no intention of letting his sceptical hearer off. "Excuse me, young lady," he said severely. "I heard you remark just now that you didn't believe in it. You will have to believe in it before the evening's out, whether you will or no. Come out into the middle! Follow me! Do as I bid you! Don't disobey. Take a seat there!"

He spoke sternly, in a tone of command. Olga followed him reluctantly, but obedient like a child, and sat down, still blushing and trembling, with a sweet shy air, in the centre of the circle. The man's strong will seemed absolutely indisputable:

she couldn't even make the necessary effort of will to disobey it.

Sir Donald's eyes were fixed firmly upon her. She averted her own with a violent struggle, and beckoned hastily to Mrs. Tristram.

"Suppose," she whispered low in her hostess's ear, "suppose he were to ask me—you understand, dear Mrs. Tristram—some awkward question?"

Mrs. Tristram smiled and nodded reassuringly. "Don't be afraid, dear," she answered with a smile. "I'll take care of that. He shall ask you nothing about Mr. Tennant."

Olga threw back her beautiful head, a little reassured, and lifted her eyes, half against her will, and full of misgivings, to meet the mesmerist's as he began his passes.

Sir Donald Mackinnon, watching her closely, noticed soon that a weird change came over her face. She did not close her eyes, indeed, like Norah, but gradually sank back, with her eyelids open, and her pupils dilated, staring hard, as it were, into dim vacancy. Then suddenly, with a rise and fall of her heaving bosom, she seemed to become aware of some unseen Presence. She clasped her hands, bending forward eagerly as one who listens, while her whole slight frame quivered and trembled, like a leaf before the wind, with suppressed emotion. A muttered word hung unspoken on her lips. Sir Donald could hardly catch the sound, but he fancied to

himself from the shape of the mouth that the word was "Kalee!"

Meanwhile the mesmerist, moving his hands rapidly to and fro before her, redoubled his exertions to close her eyes with the intensest energy. He darted his fingers with strange gestures towards the unclosed lids, and seemed by his grimaces to be struggling hard with some invisible enemy. All was in vain: the eyelids still remained obstinately open: and the performer gasped for breath heavily. Big clammy drops stood on his moistened brow: he was straining every nerve and wearying every muscle in the unequal contest. Do what he would, he could not make this obstinate girl shut her eyes: and the very persistence with which she held them open seemed to put him more and more earnestly upon his mettle.

At last he sank exhausted into a chair. "It's no use," he muttered discontentedly, folding his arms. "I was never so utterly baffled in my life before. The girl 's an enigma! She's too self-willed for me! And a mere chit of a child too! I must give it up. She *won't* be mesmerised."

As he spoke, Olga rose slowly, staggering from her seat, and stood gazing with a wild stare into blank space before her.

The mesmerist observed her eyes in sudden amazement. "Great heavens!" he cried, slowly realising the true state of the case: "she *is* asleep! Asleep already! Fast asleep all the time, by Jove, and with her eyes open!"

"She always sleeps so," Mrs. Hilary Tristram whispered softly in his ear. "Mr. Tennant told dear Norah it was due to some slight congenital injury to the nerves of the eyelids."

Sir Donald Mackinnon whistled low. "I thought so," he muttered. "Odd—confoundedly odd, too. Keen, come here; I want to tell you something."

The two men whispered together alone for a second, and then Sir Donald, as by mute assent, standing forth in the middle by the mesmerist's side, spoke out a loud short sentence in Hindustani.

Olga started like a frightened fawn, and bowed her head humbly at the sound. "Great Kalee," she cried, in the same language, but in low and strangely altered accents, "I hear thy behest. I obey the summons."

Not a soul present save Sir Donald and Lady Mackinnon knew the precise import of those terrible words: but the deep earnestness and thrilling conviction with which Olga spoke them made every one in the drawing-room shudder with horror. A terrible change had come at once over her voice and countenance. It was no longer Olga—their gentle, soft-souled Olga, that spoke: it was the low suppressed implacable murmur of a human tigress.

Sir Donald uttered another word or two, incomprehensible to the rest of the visitors; and then Olga, moving forward a step or two wildly from her seat, cast her hungry eyes around in doubt upon the assembled company.

She scanned them all, with a searching glance: presently, her great glittering pupils fixed themselves upon Norah, where she sat helpless on the chair in the centre. The mesmerist touched Norah's eyes with his flabby fingers, and they opened at once as if by magic. She gazed at Olga in mute fascination. A violent wave of passionate emotion swept with fierce force over the elder girl's agitated features.

"Must *that* be the sacrifice?" she murmured slowly in English, but with concentrated horror. "Must that be the sacrifice? Hard: hard! But Kalee wills it! It is well! It is well! I obey the goddess!"

She drew from her neck her large silk kerchief —an Indian kerchief, delicately figured, folded round her dress diagonally as a sort of fichu; and proceeded to twist it into a running noose. Then she slowly took three steps forward towards the vacantly smiling Norah.

Sir Donald started in a perfect agony of expectation. "Great powers!" he cried. "The girl is twisting that handkerchief round exactly as if she were noosing a roomal."

"What is a roomal?" Mrs. Hilary Tristram asked in an awed undertone.

"A roomal!" Sir Donald answered with affected carelessness. "Oh, nothing, nothing. Just merely a handkerchief. A handkerchief used by the Thugs, you know, to throttle and garrote their helpless victims. The girl looks

as if she meant to try it, too. Just notice her action!"

Olga turned and stared him stoutly in the face. She stared with a bold and impudent air, and answered in a voice of low effrontery, "This isn't a roomal, you see," shaking it out; "it's only a neckerchief—a common neckerchief."

"Leave her alone," Mr. Keen interposed in a low undertone. "Let us see the natural end of the whole little drama. We won't interfere. We'll let her act it out. We'll leave her entirely to her own devices and her own promptings."

Olga turned away once more with a glance over her shoulder, and continued twisting the noose in the handkerchief. Then she stepped yet one pace nearer to the unconscious Norah, who sat now with wide-open eyes, gazing helpless at her friend, as if some snake had fascinated her with its fatal glance. A cold chill ran through the fair girl's slight figure as Olga approached, still coiling the handkerchief in her slender fingers. Norah had no power to stir or speak; but with a paralysed air she watched and waited, as the fluttering bird watches and waits for the advancing serpent. Next moment, she knew, in her dimly conscious mind, that coiling handkerchief would be around her own neck to strangle her pitilessly. It was not her sweet friend who was creeping slowly upon her; it was some evil spirit, some great black creature, coming nearer, nearer. And yet, she knew not why, she was not afraid: merely

spell-bound, fascinated, immovable. She did not cry, or try to cry, as in a hideous nightmare: she waited calmly and awfully for her approaching destiny.

As Olga stood there, irresolute and hesitating, with the handkerchief coiled and noosed like a lasso in her tremulous fingers, a sign from Sir Donald informed the mesmerist that enough of the drama had now been acted. The next step in the play would have been far too hideous for public rehearsal. Sir Donald was satisfied: his conjecture was correct: the votary of Kalee stood openly confessed and unmasked before him. He motioned to Mr. Keen, and Mr. Keen, with a sigh of regret, placing himself behind Norah's chair, began a series of reversed passes, intended to bring the unconscious Olga back to her own waking personality. At the first pass, the bloodless hands ceased as if by magic from twisting the kerchief. Two or three more sufficed to rouse Olga to her first mesmeric stage, as she stood with her big beautiful eyes staring vacantly into space before her. But there the mesmerist's power failed him. He endeavoured in vain to fully wake her. Pass after pass was tried with no effect.

"I can't do it," he muttered angrily at last. "I worked so hard at putting her into the comatose condition that I can't for the life of me now get her out of it again. I'm faint, faint: I have lost power. I went too far. Brandy, brandy, quick! bring me some brandy!"

He sank upon a couch, with his arms folded listlessly in front of him. They brought the brandy, and he poured himself out a big wine-glassful, which he tossed off neat without a moment's hesitation. Then he waited and fanned himself with his handkerchief a little. At last, as the spirit gave him fresh strength, he rose slowly, and once more confronted that immovable statue, standing cold and white with the untwisted handkerchief hanging loosely now from the pallid fingers. A few more passes undid the spell. Olga gave a great start—a short sharp cry—and woke up suddenly with a terrible awakening. Her eyes came back at once to measurable space from the remote distance. The expression of concentrated determination and ferocity in her fixed features gave way first to one of pure bewilderment and next to another of unspeakable shamefaced horror. She gazed around her in awe for a moment as if barely conscious of her present surroundings; then, with the one word "Kalee" bursting painfully from her blanched lips, she dropped the handkerchief in a frenzy of shame, and darted, conscience-stricken, hastily from the room. Mrs. Tristram made a sign with her hand to one of the elder girls. The girl understood and hurriedly followed her.

The mesmerist, with a smile of self-conscious triumph on his inexpressive face, glanced round for applause at the attentive company. Nobody applauded. It was all too life-like, too vivid, too

terrible. The line which separates illusion from fact had been overstepped. The suggested tragedy came too near a real one.

Mr. Keen, baffled of his expected applause, moved over quietly to the still smiling Norah. He waved his hands once or twice before her, and she woke forthwith, breathing hard and deep, in a weary fashion.

"What did you think you felt?" Sir Donald asked, coming mysteriously with a whisper to her side.

"I don't exactly remember," Norah answered with a sigh. "I feel so awfully dreamy still. I don't like it. I wish I hadn't allowed Mr. Keen to mesmerise me. But I think I fancied I was somewhere in India, in a sort of jungle—I don't know what—but something or other terrible was going to happen. . . . It wasn't snakes and it wasn't tigers. . . . There was a woman . . . a black woman . . . a tall black woman—with awful eyes——" She broke off suddenly. "Give me a glass of wine," she cried in a pained voice. "I can't bear to think any more about it."

CHAPTER IX.

Lowering Clouds.

IR DONALD turned and walked into the garden. His brow was hot, and his fancy fired. He paced the lawn quickly and excitedly. The mesmerist stepped with a dejected air in long strides beside him.

"Keen," the old Indian cried at last, "I don't half like the look of it. This is not all right. I'm superstitious, I know, but I don't care a straw what you call me in that matter. Did you see yourself what the girl was doing? She was noosing that kerchief, regular Thug fashion, to strangle Norah Bickersteth!"

The mesmerist bit his lip reflectively. "Never saw such an unappreciative audience in all my life," he said in a testy voice. "They might have given me a round with their hands at least. It's the best bit of mesmerism I ever did in my born days. The girl's acting was simply magnificent!"

"Acting!" Sir Donald echoed contemptuously. "It wasn't acting! It was sheer reality! The lassie's a Thug! She's been dedicated to Kalee!"

Mr. Keen glanced curiously sideways at his companion. Scotchmen have certainly got some queer ideas of their own. Besides, the old fellow

had obviously appreciated Mrs. Hilary Tristram's excellent cognac. Drunk or mad, one or the other! The mesmerist marvelled, and said nothing.

Presently Sir Donald spoke again. He clutched his friend's arm in the shadow of the lilac bushes.

"Keen," he said, "I want to tell you something. I knew Everard Trevelyan well in India. He had but two children, this girl Olga, and a boy called Theodore. . . . Now, listen to me, and don't make light of it. It's a deuced odd fact, Keen, but it's true for all that, what I'm going to tell you. As I stood there and watched her just this minute, a picture rose distinctly before my eyes—a picture I'd clean forgotten for years—a picture of Everard Trevelyan's bungalow at Moozuffernugger. The boy was lying dead in his cot—her little brother—two days before she came away from India. There was a mystery about it, never cleared up. Some said the bearer, and some the ayah; but anyhow the thing was very remarkable. The child had a dark blue line traced right around his throat, and his eyes and tongue protruded horribly, for all the world as if he'd been suffocated. One would say, a handkerchief tied about his neck. They never discovered how it happened. Nobody could be convicted of it. . . . They never thought of his little sister. . . . Deuced odd, I call it, Keen, don't you, really?"

The mesmerist looked at him with glassy eyes. "Re-markably odd," he said in a careless voice. "Re-markably. Re-markably."

Sir Donald took another turn and muttered half to himself—it was clear his companion was wholly unsympathetic—"Suspicion never pointed to anyone. Ayah, desperately fond of the children, wept like a child when Olga was taken from her. . . . And yet it 's certainly very odd. The girl seemed guileless and simple enough. . . . But who can tell? Kalee's emissaries go forth unconscious in their deep sleep. Depend upon it, there 's something in it, there 's something in it."

He paced the lawn once more feverishly: then he spoke again: "I remember well when the news was broken to her! She cried as if her little heart would burst. Poor little soul, I can see her this minute! . . . It 's very strange. I don't half like the look of it."

The mesmerist turned and stared him in the face. "My dear Mackinnon," he said testily, "you 're talking an awful lot of pure rubbish. Mesmerism 's a very powerful agency. It brought back forgotten old Indian reminiscences to the girl's mind: stirred the inmost chords and fibres of her most intimate nature: set her even speaking her outlandish lingo, in which you and she can jabber together so glibly. She must have heard some Indian servant, who was about her as a child, talk much of the Thugs, or whatever you call them: and that set her excited fancy working, and made her go off at once on the Thug hallucination. Believe me, you under estimate the power of mesmerism."

Sir Donald only looked up meditatively at the stars. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio," he muttered in a slow drawl, "than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Meanwhile, Olga, in her own room, had been joined by Norah, who came up pale and trembling to enquire for her.

"What has made you ill, darling?" the younger girl asked her tenderly, throwing her soft arm in a caressing attitude round her friend's neck.

Olga drew back instinctively from her touch. "Oh, don't put your hand on me, don't come near me, Norah," she cried in alarm. "I don't know what 's the matter with me to-night. I don't feel a bit like myself at all. I seem to be so wicked, so terribly wicked. You mustn't touch me!"

"*You* wicked, darling!" Norah echoed, kissing her. "You 're not wicked. You could never be wicked. You 're just a saint; that 's what I call you, Olga."

Olga brushed away a rising tear. "I can't understand it at all, Norah pet," she said dreamily. "For the very first time in all my life, I seemed half conscious in my sleep just now of my own actions. I wish—I wish to goodness they hadn't mesmerised me."

Norah drew back with a sudden look of alarm. "Mesmerised you, Olga?" she cried in much surprise. "You don't mean to say you let them mesmerise you? Why, Mr. Tennant begged me not

to allow them. I wouldn't have let them if only I'd been awake myself and known all about it."

"But they did," Olga answered, "and I seemed to be dimly aware all the time I was asleep of what I was doing. And when I awoke—oh, it was too horrible! . . . Norah, Norah, my pet, my darling, don't, don't come near me! I beg of you. I implore you."

"Why, Olga, why?"

"Oh, Norah, darling, as I stood there in the drawing-room, waking yet sleeping,—I'm afraid to tell you,—I seemed to be aware of some awful being, bloodthirsty, pitiless, black, invisible, floating in front of me, under whose orders I acted without hope of resistance. I saw her before me with my bodily eyes, and I heard her speak to me in some strange language. I had to obey whatever she told me: I had to obey her, though I hated and detested it. I don't know what it all meant, my darling, but I feel as if I was terribly, terribly wicked. . . . And what's worst and most awful of all, Norah, I feel, now with my quickened senses, as if that terrible being had always, always been quite familiar to me."

Norah soothed her neck with one hand, and pressed her fingers tenderly with the other, but answered nothing.

The terrified girl laid her face gently on her friend's shoulder and sobbed away her grief for some moments in silence. Then she raised her head once more and murmured, "And Alan didn't

want me to be mesmerised! I've disobeyed Alan without knowing it! Where's Alan? Has he come back yet?"

"No," Norah answered. "Harry and he haven't returned. They'll be back soon. Don't worry, darling. Oh, I wish to goodness you hadn't been mesmerised."

"Not come back," Olga cried in alarm. "Oh, he's lost! he's lost! Norah! Norah! I saw her smiling, smiling horribly. I remember the smile! It means evil! She always smiles like that, I know, when she sees death or misfortune happen to anyone. It was a ghastly smile—so fiendish and exultant. Oh, Norah, Norah, it makes me faint even to think of her."

"Of whom? of whom?" Norah cried in horror.

"I don't know. I can't say, my darling. I can't remember her right name this minute; but I saw her just now! I saw her! I saw her! . . . He's dead! He's dead! I'm perfectly sure he is! I know that smile! Oh, Norah, Norah, her smile is so deadly!"

She flung herself down at full length on the couch, buried her face between her outstretched palms, and cried to herself long and silently.

At last she lifted her head once more. "And I didn't finish doing what she bid me!" she cried in anguish. "It was very wrong of me! I left off in the midst! I ought to have finished doing what she bid me!"

CHAPTER X.

The Storm Bursts.

HE party in the drawing-room had broken up rather suddenly. Everybody felt, in a certain dim instinctive fashion, there was something uncanny about this mesmerising business. Sir Donald and Mr. Keen were idly pacing the lawn outside together: Norah and Olga had retired to the obscurity of their own bedroom. Conversation languished. Mrs. Hilary Tristram tried in vain the recuperative effect of a little music. One of the guests sat down to the piano, and touching the keys lightly declared in a loud soprano voice she was "a happy haymaker." Nobody took the slightest notice of the romantic and obviously inopportune declaration. The elder men suggested cards: but the younger (as usual) all disclaimed the most elementary knowledge of the game of whist, and sidled off moodily in little knots into remote corners. It was clear the harmony of the evening had been quite spoilt. That unfortunate mesmerising had totally upset the delicate nerves of the assembled company. Mrs. Hilary Tristram, best and ablest of hostesses, relinquished the position at last as hopeless.

Retreating gracefully, she subsided of herself into an easy-chair, and assumed the attitude of one not wholly indisposed at an early hour to speed the parting guest with a glass of seltzer and a friendly valediction.

The guests for their part soon interpreted the languid attitude of their hostess aright. One after another dropped off rapidly, with mechanical thanks, as they bowed themselves out, for a very pleasant and interesting evening. "Deuced slow," the men murmured one to the other, as they lit their cigars from borrowed lights outside the front porch. "That mesmerising rubbish simply spoilt the whole evening. Hard lines on those two poor girls, too, to go trying their constitutions in that stupid fashion. Quite surprised at it, for my part, in a sensible, amiable woman of the world like Mrs. Hilary Tristram."

Before the last guests had muttered their farewells, Norah glided softly into the room once more for a brief moment, and whispered something in her aunt's ear. Mrs. Tristram motioned back Dr. Hazleby to a chair with her hand.

"I want to speak with you," she said in a low voice as he took his seat again. "Norah and Olga may wish to consult you."

Dr. Hazleby sat back and waited for the other guests to go. His conscience smote him for having permitted the mesmerist to "carry this wretched nonsense so far with Miss Trevelyan." In his heart of hearts, he was fain to confess to

himself, with a tinge of self-contempt for the avowal, that there was "something in it."

So there was. More than he imagined.

Presently, Mrs. Tristram ran upstairs, and soon came down again, looking very agitated.

"Poor dear Olga seems dreadfully hysterical," she said with a sigh. "She doesn't look yet as if she'd quite got over that horrid mesmerism. I ought never to have allowed the man to work upon her feelings so. She's talking in a rambling, delirious sort of way, poor dear, about somebody having compelled her against her will to do something or other that she thinks dreadfully wicked. And she says there's someone or other smiling horribly at her. Don't you think Dr. Hazleby, just to quiet her nerves, you ought to give her something?"

Ladies, even learned ladies like Mrs. Tristram, regard medical science as a form of magic, and drugs as a sort of charm or fetish. Their universal remedy for all the ills that female flesh is heir to, from paralysis or heart disease down to fainting or hysteria, is to "give her something." What, is immaterial. Morphia or sal-volatile, strychnine and arsenic or eau sucrée tempered with orange flower water: a drug, a drug, in the name of all that's merciful.

Dr. Hazleby went up at once to see the interesting patients. Olga's pupils were very dilated. Her pulse was slow, yet bounding and unnatural. She seemed in a very marked state of exhaustion and excitement.

"Don't you think, young ladies," he said cheerily, "you ought each to have a glass of port wine, just to set you up, now?"

Olga assented readily enough, and the good doctor went down in his clumsy, hearty way, himself, to fetch it. "Wait a bit," he said in a stage aside, as Mrs. Tristram poured it out from the decanter. "I'll just run home and get a wee drop of something stronger—something to quiet the nerves, you know. Miss Trevelyan seems to have something weighing on her mind. Your nephew and Mr. Tennant haven't come in yet from the river, I fancy."

"No," Mrs. Tristram answered. "They went up the river this afternoon in the duck-boat. I'm beginning to get a little nervous about them myself, to tell you the truth, my dear Dr. Hazleby."

"Oh, they'll be all right, ma'am," the doctor replied, with gruff kindliness. "Young men are always getting into scrapes, and frightening their friends, and then turning up again. Depend upon it, that's what's the matter with Miss Trevelyan. She won't sleep a single wink to-night if she doesn't have something to quiet her nerves a bit."

And he ran hastily out of the door, to his own surgery just round the next corner.

When he came back, he brought a little phial loose in his hand, and poured a few drops of a sweet white fluid from it into each of the glasses. It was the same white fluid the fakir

had taken from his double gourd and smeared on Olga's lips the day she was first dedicated to Kalee!

"What is it?" Mrs. Tristram ventured timidly to ask.

"What is it? Oh, haschish."

"And pray what 's haschish?"

"Haschish? Why, haschish is Indian hemp. You know the stuff—a common drug. It 's a powerful narcotic. The Hindu ascetics use it to produce illusions. I always find it a capital soothing draught for nervous excitement. I 've frequently given it with the very best results in similar cases."

He took the glasses up on a little tray. Olga was sitting still on the couch, with her head between her hands, and her bosom heaving and falling visibly. "Has—Harry Bickersteth come back yet?" she asked with eager haste. The doctor nodded a sagacious nod to Mrs. Hilary Tristram.

"I told you so," the nod seemed visibly to say. "She 's troubling her head about young Alan Tennant."

"No, they 've not come back yet," he answered cheerily, handing her the glass, "but they 're expected home now every minute. There 's no danger: not the slightest danger. Tide was late owing to the surf on the bar. They 'll be back immediately. Here, drink the port. It 's very good for you."

Olga took it and drained it off mechanically.

Then she buried her head once more in the sofa cushion.

"Come, come," the doctor said, with kindly insistence. "This won't do, my dear young lady. You must both get to bed now, this very minute. It 's high time you two were fast asleep and snoring. Young people need plenty of beauty-sleep. Miss Norah, see that your friend goes to bed at once, and doesn't lie awake crying. And you too. You shall hear about your brother and Mr. Tennant the very first thing when you wake in the morning."

Mrs. Hilary Tristram sat up very late by herself that evening, wondering when her nephew would ever come back, and full of dim unshaped forebodings about him. She wished she hadn't let him go out on the river with Mr. Alan Tennant. What was that Sir Donald had said the day of the picnic about the second sight, and misfortune brewing for the young oculist? She didn't believe in the second sight; but still, one can't help feeling just a little bit nervous. Duck-boats, she knew, were fearfully unsafe, and the branches of the Thore were always shifty. She sat up alone till long past two, watching and waiting eagerly for Harry's arrival. But no Harry came at last, and she was fain in the end to take up her candlestick with a sinking heart, and mount the lonely staircase tremulously to her own bedroom.

As she passed by Olga's and Norah's door, she

heard the sound of a voice or voices. Those naughty girls hadn't fallen asleep yet! They were still talking. Had they too waited and watched up there for Harry and Alan? . . . She listened awhile on tiptoe at the lintel. Her heart beat fast. A voice was certainly speaking—it was evidently Olga's. She caught the very words. It said in clear and definite accents,

"It was very wrong of me! I left off in the midst! I OUGHT TO HAVE FINISHED DOING WHAT SHE BID ME!"

Mrs. Hilary Tristram went on relieved. They were awake, no doubt, but talking about some quite indifferent matters. Some little dereliction of every-day duty. Olga's voice was perfectly wakeful. What a pity the draught had had so little effect upon her.

But if Mrs. Tristram could have looked that moment through the panels of the door, she would have seen Norah lying fascinated in her own bed, and Olga, with wide-staring eyes fixed wildly upon her, standing in her delicate white-frilled night-dress by the rustling curtains, and coiling in her bloodless trembling fingers that big silk handkerchief—the Indian roomal!

CHAPTER XI.

After the Tempest.

EXT morning, Olga remembered in a dim way that she had slept very, very soundly: and she awoke with that painful weary feeling in the muscles of the throat and neck which often follows a strong dose of any powerful narcotic. She was sure Dr. Hazleby had given her something to make her doze off: and as she glanced askance at Norah, still sleeping heavily on her own bed—there were two in the room—she felt certain that Norah too had drunk something other than wine in the draught the doctor had so carelessly handed her.

She looked in the glass, and saw there were deep dark rings round her big eyes. Alan would think her quite plain to-day. . . . Had Alan come back? . . . The thought, recurring slowly, as in a dream, made all her fears revive again. She felt the drug hadn't worn itself out yet, or she would have remembered him sooner! She dressed quickly, without waking Norah.

"Poor darling," she thought; "she was tired too. Let her sleep her sleep out. It will do her

good. She isn't as anxious to know about her brother, of course, as I am to hear about dear, dear Alan."

She went downstairs looking pale and haggard. Mrs. Tristram rose to kiss her as she entered the breakfast-room.

"My dear," she said, "you're not well this morning. That horrid mesmerism did you no good. I shall never allow you again, as long as I live, to play such tricks with your constitution."

"Oh, I shall be all right soon, thanks," Olga answered distractedly, sitting down to the table and turning over the envelope of a letter on her plate with careless fingers. "It tired me rather—that was all. . . . Have Harry Bickersteth and Mr. Tennant come back home yet?"

"No," Mrs. Tristram replied gravely. "But I'm not frightened, dear. . . . At least, not very. If anything serious had happened, we'd surely have heard of it long before this time. The fishermen would have told us. Boys will be boys, and will get into mischief. They've gone up the river and got too far or something, and had to stop the night no doubt at Ponton. We shall have a telegram, I fancy, before we've finished breakfast. Is Norah coming down? How is she this morning?"

Olga blushed, she knew not why. "No," she answered with incomprehensible evasiveness. "She isn't dressed yet. She . . . she hasn't got up, in fact. She's sleeping so soundly. I think

. . . in fact, I fancy . . . Dr. Hazleby must have given us something to make us sleep, you know."

Mrs. Tristram smiled a knowing smile. "So he did," she answered. "Indian hemp. That's what's making Norah so oversleep herself."

Olga gave a faint little shudder. "Indian hemp!" she murmured. "Always something Indian! I hate India and all that belongs to it. It seems somehow to be a sort of fatality with me that everything Indian should always bring some kind of misfortune."

"Oh, don't say that," Mrs. Tristram cried in evident alarm. "Please don't. You mustn't even think it. Why, Harry's duck-boat—the boat they've both gone up the river in, you know—it's called the *Indian Princess*, Olga. Harry named it in joke after the little Maharanee he met last autumn down in Norfolk."

At the word, Olga suddenly dropped the knife and fork with which she was pretending to play with her breakfast, and stood staring hard before her, with the same strange far-away look in her eyes Mrs. Tristram had noticed the previous evening during the whole of those horrid mesmeric experiments. A single word rose once more to her lips. She muttered it twice,—"Kalee! Kalee!"

At that very moment, the door opened, and Sir Donald Mackinnon entered unannounced.

"We old Indians are inquisitive," he said gravely, with a slight bow, "but I've come round

early to enquire this morning after my friend, Miss Norah. I haven't slept a single wink to-night, with this second sight of mine, thinking about her, Mrs. Tristram. I've lain awake and listened to the owls hooting, and the waves breaking, and imagined all manner of evil things, and fancied I could hear her moaning and groaning. How is she this morning, can you tell me, Miss Trevelyan? Not up yet, ah? I hope there's nothing serious the matter with her. . . . Eh? what? . . . Why, what ails the lassie? You're looking uncommon pale and ill and gash yourself, too."

"Norah's asleep," Olga answered, trembling, she knew not why, and shrinking horribly from the old man's keen and searching glance. "I—I thought it was best not to wake her. She seemed so very ill and weak and tired."

Sir Donald gazed at her coldly and sternly. "Young lady," he said, in a harsh voice, "I'm thinking it's not all right this morning with my friend Miss Norah. Will you go up and call her, please, Mrs. Tristram? There's mischief, I'm afraid, in this young lady's eyes. We Highlanders know the eerie look in them, and what it portends in the way of evil!"

Mrs. Hilary Tristram ran upstairs with vague forebodings of trouble in her heart. Olga followed her, half unconscious with terror, and weighed down with some awful burden of remorse,—for what, she knew not.

The room had two little cretonne-curtained beds in it. In one of them, Olga had slept that night. The curtains of the other were half drawn, and Norah's form was still lying, quite stiff and motionless, beneath the dainty coverlet.

Olga approached softly on tiptoe. "Norah!" she whispered. "Darling Norah!"

A corner of the sheet just covered her face. Norah neither stirred nor answered.

With gentle fingers, Olga drew the bedclothes from her face and neck. Then with a fearful shriek, she fell back and fainted. The shriek rang and vibrated through the whole house. It was a death-like cry of unutterable agony.

In a moment, the awful truth had burst upon her soul. She remembered it all, all, quite clearly now. Norah was dead, and she herself was her murderer. She herself was her murderer: she herself—and Kalee!

The cry roused the whole household like a tocsin. Sir Donald and the servants hurried to the room. They found Olga insensible, supported in Mrs. Tristram's arms, while Norah, stretched upon the bed, with head thrown back, lay motionless and still as a marble statue. Her pretty blue eyes stood wide open, fixed in a deathly stare on the blank ceiling; the soft dimpled cheeks showed white and ashen; and, most terrible of all, around her smooth fair neck appeared in awful distinctness a dark blue line—the livid death-mark of that fatal handkerchief.

For one solemn moment no one stirred or spoke or even breathed almost. They stood stricken and petrified at the horrid sight. Then Sir Donald, slowly awaking as if from a hideous dream, lifted the senseless Olga in his arms, and carried her off to another room unresisting.

"This is a matter for the police," he said sternly. "There 's been murder done, and we know who did it."

He looked suspiciously at the little silver image on her neck—the image of Kalee that the fakir had hung there. A dark red smear passed across its face. He gazed closer. It was blood—blood—blood on her lips—the fresh clotted blood of a human victim!

Blood had spurted for a moment from Norah's mouth in the agony of the throttling. Kalee that night had drunk of her sacrifice.

As Mrs. Tristram, unable yet to realise the terrible truth, stood wringing her helpless hands by Norah's bedside, a servant came in with a message from the boatmen.

"Something about Master Harry," she whispered soft below her breath. "They 're afraid he 's lost. The boatmen say the *Indian Princess* has come floating down the river with the tide this morning . . . empty, quite empty, and bottom upward."

Mrs. Tristram answered never a word. Her cup was full already. Nothing else would make much difference. She merely stood and rocked

herself idly backward and forward, in the impotent recklessness of utter misery.

Next minute, Olga glided to her side. She had come back to herself, and stood now erect and pale and tremulous and beautiful.

"Send for the police," she said in a stony tone. "I know I did it. I give myself up. I have nothing to say for myself.—Norah is dead. It was I who killed her.—Alan is dead. I have heard the message.—I loved them both. I shall be glad to die. I have nothing to live for. I deserve it! I deserve it!"

Once more a servant entered in hot haste, and held a telegram which she handed half hesitatingly on the salver to Olga. The girl dashed it aside with an imperious wave of her white hand.

"Perhaps," Mrs. Tristram murmured in a low voice, "it may be from Harry or Mr. Tennant."

Sir Donald opened it mechanically and read it aloud:

"Congratulations, dear Olga, and best wishes for your future happiness. You have chosen well.

"EVERARD AND MARION TREVELYAN."

It was an Indian telegram! Always India! What mockery it seemed at such a moment! Surely, surely Kalee had sent it! It was Kalee's appropriate greeting to her votary.

CHAPTER XII.

An Aquatic Excursion.

EANWHILE, where were Harry Bickersteth and Alan Tennant? Up the river in the *Indian Princess*, they had had an easy voyage, lazily paddling for the first hour or two. The mud-banks of the Thore, ugly as they seem at first sight, have nevertheless a singular and unwonted interest of their own; the interest derived from pure weirdness, and melancholy, and loneliness—a strange contrast to the bustling life and gaiety of the bright little watering place whose church tower rises conspicuously visible over the dykes beyond them. On the vast soft ooze-flats, solemn gulls stalk soberly, upheld by their broad web-feet from sinking: while among the numberless torrents caused by the ebbing tide tall long-legged herons stand with arched necks and eager eyes, keenly intent on the quick pursuit of the elusive elves in the stream below. The grass-wrack waves dark in the current underneath, and the pretty sea-lavender purples the muddy islets in the side channels with its scentless bloom. Altogether a strange, quaint, desolate spot, that Thore estuary, bounded on either side by marshy

saltings, where long-horned black cattle wander unrestrained, and high embankments keep out the encroaching sea at floods and spring-tides. Not a house or a cottage lies anywhere in sight. Miles upon miles of slush in the inundated channels give place beyond to miles upon miles of drained and reclaimed marshland by the uninhabited saltings in the rear.

They had paddled their way quietly and noiselessly among the flats and islets for a couple of hours, carefully noting the marks of the wary wild-fowl on either side, and talking in low tones together about that perennial topic of living interest to all past or present generations of Oxford men, the dear old 'Varsity. Alan still held a fellowship at Oriel, and Harry was an undergraduate of Queen's: so the two found plenty of matter to converse about in common, comparing notes as to the deeds of daring in bearding the proctors, feats of prowess in town and gown rows, the fatal obsequiousness of the Oxford tradesman, and the inevitable final evolutionary avatar of that mild being under a new and terrible form as the persistent dun, to the end of their tether. Such memories are sweet—when sufficiently remote: and the Oxford man who does not love to talk them over with the rising spirits of a younger generation deserves never to have drunk Archdeacon at Merton or to have smoked Bacon's best Manillas beneath the hospitable rafters of Christ Church common room.

At last, in turning up a side streamlet, on the southern bank,—Thorborough, as everybody knows, lies to the northward,—they passed an islet of the usual soft Thore slime, on whose tiny summit grew a big bunch of that particular local East Anglian wild-flower which Olga had said she would like to paint, on the day of Sir Donald Mackinnon's picnic.

"I say, Bickersteth," Alan suggested lightly, as they passed close beneath it: "don't you think we could manage to pick a stem or two of the artemisia—that feathery fluffy yellow flower there? Miss Trevelyan"—and he tried not to look too conscious—"wants to make a little picture out of it, she told me. I expect we could pull in and get near enough to clutch at a branch or so."

"No," Harry answered, shaking his head confidently. "I know by heart all the tricks and manners of the creeks and the river here. I know every twist and turn of the backwaters. No quicksand on earth could possibly be more treacherous than our Thore mud. It 's a mud *per se*, quite unique in its own way for stickiness. If you try to land on it, you go on sinking, sinking, sinking, like an elephant in a bog, or a Siberian mammoth, till you disappear at last bodily below the surface with a gentle gurgle; and the mud closes neatly over your head; and they fish you out a few days later with a crooked boat-hook, as Mr. Mantalini says, 'a demd moist unpleasant corpse,' and dirty

at that into the bargain. You must wait and get a bit of the stuff a little further on. There's plenty more growing higher up the backwater. We can land easier there on some of the hards, where the side creeks run deep and clear over solid pebble bottoms."

They paddled on noiselessly through the water as before, away up the silent, unpeopled inlet, among the lonely ooze and great stranded islands of salt-marsh vegetation. At every stroke, the aspect of the country grew wilder and more desolate. At last they came to a broad expansion of the tributary creek. Alan could hardly have believed any place so solitary existed in England. Some of the islands, surrounded on every side by slimy channels of deep ooze, could only be approached by a boat at high spring-tides, and even then nowhere save at a single unobtrusive landing-place. They were thickly overgrown with rank brown hay.

"And even the owners," Harry said laughing, and pointing to one such dreary flat with demonstrative finger, "only visit them once a year in a shallow punt or low barge at haymaking time to cut the hay-crop. Sometimes the bargemen from up stream at Ponton come for a lark in the night, before the owner harvests it, and mow the crop, and carry it away down the river and out by sea to market in London; and nobody ever knows a word about it till the owner turns up disconsolate a week or so later, and finds his hay

clean gone, and not a soul on earth to tell him what the dickens has ever become of it."

"It 's fearfully lonely," Alan said with a shudder, looking round him in surprise at the trackless waste of ooze and sedges. "If a man were to get lost or murdered in one of these dreary channels, now, it might be weeks and weeks—ay, and years too—before anybody on earth ever discovered him."

"It might," Harry answered. "You say the truth. A capital place indeed for a murder. As De Quincey says, you could recommend it confidently to a friend. Nobody 'd ever be one penny the wiser.—See, there s some more of your flower nodding away on the bank over yonder—what did you call it?—artemisia, wasn't it? Well, here we can get at it, I expect, with a little trouble, if you don't mind wading. You 're prepared to go through fire and water, I suppose, for Miss Trevelyan?"

Alan's face grew somewhat graver. "I 'm prepared to get my bags wet through in the sea," he said, "if that 's all, to do anything reasonable, for any lady. Miss Trevelyan said she 'd like the flower, and I thought I might as well try to get a little bit for her."

"Well, you needn't be so huffy about it, anyhow," Harry went on, good-humouredly. "No harm in being in love with a pretty girl, that I know of: at least it doesn't say so in the Ten Commandments. Stick the pole firm into the bottom

there, will you? By Jove, the stream runs fast! How deep is it? About two feet, eh? Well, we can tuck our trousers up to the thighs and wade ahead then. The channel of the stream's firm enough here. Pebble bottom! I expect it's pebble right up to the island."

They pulled off their shoes and socks hurriedly, and rolled up their trousers as Harry had suggested. Then the younger lad stepped lightly out of the boat on to the solid floor, and drove the pole deep into the slimy mud-bank beside it. The mud rose in a veritable cliff, and seemed to the eye quite firm and consistent: but it gave before the pole like slush in the street, where the brushes have heaped it on one side by the gutters. He tied the duck-boat to the pole by the painter, and gave a hand to Alan as his friend stepped out with a light foot into the midst of the little rapid channel.

"Bottom's quite solid just here," he said. "You needn't funk it. We can walk close up to the side of the island. These streams run regularly over hard bottoms, though the mud rises sheer on either side of them, till you get quite up to the head waters. There they lose themselves, as it were, in the mud: or at least, ooze out of it by little driblets from nowhere in particular. Come along, Tennant. We can pick some of Miss Trevelyan's *specialité* on the far side of the island, I fancy."

They waded slowly up the rapid current, Alan pushing his stick as he went into the mud-bank, which looked as firm and solid as rock, but really

proved on nearer trial to be made up of deep soft light-brown slush. They attacked the island from every side—a double current ran right round it—but all in vain: an impenetrable barrier of oozy mud girt it round unassailably on every side like the moat of a castle.

"I shall try to walk through it," Alan cried at last in a sort of mock desperation, planting one foot boldly in the midst of the mud. "What's slush and dirt, however thick, compared with the expressed wishes of a fair lady?"

As he spoke, he began to sink ominously into the soft deep ooze, till his leg was covered right up to the thigh.

Harry seized his arm with a nervous grasp in instant trepidation. "For Heaven's sake," he cried, "what are you doing, Tennant? The stuff's got no bottom at all. Jump back, jump back—here, take my hand for it! You'll sink right down into an endless mud slough."

Alan felt himself still sinking: but instead of drawing back as Harry told him, and letting his whole weight fall on to the one foot still securely planted on the solid bed of the little river, he lifted that one safe support right off the ground, and tried with his stick to find a foothold in the treacherous mud-bank. Next instant, he had sunk with both legs up to his waist, and was struggling vainly to recover his position by grasping at the overhanging weeds on the island.

Harry, with wonderful presence of mind, did

not try at all to save him as he stood, lest both should tumble together into the slough; but running back hastily for the pole, fastened the boat to his own walking-stick which he stuck into the mud, and brought back the longer piece of wood in his hands to where Alan stood, still struggling violently, and sunk to the armpits in the devouring slush. He took his own stand firmly on the pebbly bottom of the little stream, stuck the far end of the pole on the surface of the island, and then lowered it to the level of Alan's hands, so as to form a sort of rude extemporised crane or lever. Alan clutched at it quickly with an eager grip; and Harry, who was a strong young fellow enough, gradually raised him out of the encumbering mud by lifting the pole to the height of his shoulders. Next minute, Alan stood beside him on the hard, and looked ruefully down at his wet and dripping muddy clothes, one malodorous mass of deep black ooze from waist to ankle.

"You must stand up to your arms in the stream," Harry said laughing, in answer to his comically rueful glance, "and let the water wash away the mud a little. A pretty pickle you look, to be sure. By George, I thought for a minute it was all up with you! You won't trifle with Thore ooze again in a hurry, I fancy."

Alan pulled off his flannel boating jacket and his once white ducks with a gesture of disgust, and began scrubbing them between his hands in the discoloured water.

"I must sit on the island and let them dry," he said in no very pleasant voice. "I can't go home to Thorborough looking such a mess as this, you know, Harry."

"How 'll you get on the island?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Why, you just hold the pole as you did, so, and I 'll go hand over hand, like a British acrobat on parallel bars, across the mud-bank."

"And leave me to stand here in the water alone till your clothes have dried to your perfect satisfaction! No thank you, no thank you, my dear fellow."

"I can get you over when once I 've got across, myself," Alan answered lightly. "Hold the pole out a little below the middle, and lift you, so, as if I were a circus man."

"I venture to doubt your gymnastic capabilities."

"Try me, anyhow. If it doesn't succeed, I 'll come back at once to you."

Harry fixed the pole on the island once more, and Alan, clasping it tight with his hard grip, and lifting up his legs well above the mud-bank, made his way, hand over hand, as acrobats do along a tight rope or a trapeze, to the solid surface of the little island. There he laid out his clothes carefully to dry, and sat down, holding the pole as he had suggested, lever fashion, for Harry. By dexterous twisting, he managed to land his friend safely on the island, where they both sat down on

the sun-dried top, and gazed disconsolate on the fearful waste of mud around them.

"Curious how hard the bottom is," Alan said after a while, "in the midst of so much soft ooze and slush and stuff!"

"The current washes away the soft mud, you see," Harry answered glibly, as he lighted his pipe, "leaving only the pebbles it selects at the bottom. Segregation! segregation! It's always so over all these flats. You can walk anywhere on the bottom of these streamlets."

"Well, at least," Alan said, glancing about him complacently, "we've got the flowers—any number we want of them. I should have felt like a fool indeed if I'd sunk up to my waist in that beastly ooze there, and yet never succeeded in getting what I came for. The flowers alone are the trophy of victory. It's a foreign artemisia, got stranded here by accident. Indian Wormwood or Lover's Bane the herbalists call it." And he gathered a big bunch of the yellow blossoms from the summit of the island, tying them together loosely with a shred from his handkerchief. (Men in love think nothing, it may be parenthetically observed, of tearing up a new cambric handkerchief. At a later date, it is to be feared, the person for whose sake they tear it up takes good care to repress any future outbursts of such absurd extravagance.)

They sat on the island for nearly an hour, and then, as the sun was shining hot overhead, Alan's

clothes were sufficiently dried for him to put them on again in a somewhat dingy, damp, and clinging condition. The problem now was to get back again. Alan successfully lifted down his friend at the end of the pole, in true acrobat fashion: but just as Harry touched ground in the centre of the little stream, the pole creaked and gave ominously in the middle.

"Take care of it, Tennant," the young man cried, as he fixed it once more across his shoulder. "Don't trust the weak point in the middle too much. Glide lightly over the thin ice! Hand over hand as quick as you can manage!"

"All right," Alan cried, suiting the deed to the word, and hastily letting himself glide with a rapid sliding motion along the frail support.

As he reached the middle, with a sudden snap, the pole broke. Alan did not hesitate for a minute. If he fell where he was, he would sink helplessly into the engulfing mud. He had had enough of that, and knew what it meant now. With the impetus of the breakage, he sprang dexterously forward, and just clearing the mud, fell on his hands and knees upon the hard, right in front of Harry.

"Hurt yourself, eh?" his friend asked, picking him up quickly.

"Not much," Alan answered, flinging the broken pole angrily into the stream. "Barked my knees a little: that's about all. We're unfortunate to-day. The stars are against us. There's a trifle too

much adventure to suit my taste, it strikes me somehow, in your East Anglian rivers!"

"Here's a nice fellow!" Harry retorted, laughing. "Adventures are to the adventurous, don't they say? You first go and try a mad plan to pick a useless little bunch of fluffy small flowers for a fair lady, quite in the most approved romantic fashion, for all the world like the *London Reader;* and then when you fall and bark your knees over it, you lay the blame of your own mishaps on our poor unoffending East Anglian rivers!"

"I've got the flowers still, anyhow," Alan answered triumphantly, holding them up and waving them above his head, crushed and dripping, but nevertheless perfectly intact, in his bleeding hand. He had knocked his fist against the bottom to break his fall, and cut the skin rather badly about the wrist and knuckles.

"Well, it's high time we got back to the boat," Harry continued carelessly. "If we don't make haste, we shan't be back soon enough for me to dress for dinner. I must get home before seven. Aunt's got the usual select dinner-party stirring this evening."

They turned the corner, wading still, but through much deeper water than that they had at first encountered (for the tide was now steadily rising), and made their way to the well-remembered spot where they had loosely fastened the light duck-boat.

To their annoyance and surprise, no boat was

anywhere to be seen in the neighbourhood. Only a mark as of a pole dragged by main force out of the mud,—the mark left by Harry's walking-stick.

They gazed at one another blankly for a moment. Then Alan burst into a merry laugh.

"Talk about adventures," he said; "they 'll certainly never be ended to-day. The duck-boat must have floated off on its own account quietly without us."

But Harry, instead of laughing, turned deadly pale. He knew the river better than his companion, and realised at once the full terror of the situation.

"Tennant," he cried, clutching his friend's arm nervously and eagerly, "we 're lost! we 're lost! The duck-boat *has* floated off without us: there 's no getting away, no getting away anyhow! No living power on earth can possibly save us from drowning by inches as the tide rises!"

CHAPTER XIII.

Lost.

LAN stared at his friend in blank dismay. It was some time before he could fully take in the real seriousness of their present position. But he knew Harry was no coward, and he could see by his blanched cheek and bloodless lips that a terrible danger actually environed them.

"Where 's she gone?" he asked at last tremulously.

Harry screened his eyes from the sun with his hands.

"Down stream, at first," he said, peering about in vain, "till tide rose high enough: then up, no doubt, heaven knows where, but out of sight, out of sight anyhow!"

Alan examined the bank closely. He saw in a moment how the accident had happened. Harry, in his haste to fetch the pole to save him, had driven his own walking-stick carelessly into the larger and looser hole left by the bigger piece of wood; and the force of the current, dragging at the boat, had pulled it slowly out of the unresisting mud-bank. It might have been gone a full hour: and where it had got to, no earthly power could possibly tell them.

"Can't we swim out?" he asked eagerly at last. "You and I are both tolerable swimmers."

Harry shook his head very gloomily. "No good," he said. "No good at all, I tell you. The river 's bounded by mud for acres. It 's six miles at least down to Hurdham Pier, the very first place there 's a chance of landing. If you tried to land anywhere else before, you 'd sink in mud like the mud you stuck in just now at the island. We 're bounded round by mud on every side. We stand on a little narrow shelf of pebble, with a vast swampy quagmire of mud girding it in for miles and miles and miles together."

"Can't we walk up to the source?" Alan enquired despondently, beginning to realise the full terror of the situation. "It may keep hard till we reach *terra firma?*"

"It may, but it doesn't, I 'm pretty sure," Harry answered with a groan. "However, there 's no harm anyhow in trying. Let 's walk up and see where we get to."

They waded on in silence together, feeling the bottom cautiously at each step with their sticks, till the stream began to divide and sub-divide into little finger-like muddy tributaries. Choosing the chief of these, they waded up it. Presently the bottom grew softer and softer, and a firm footing more and more impossible. At last, their feet sank in ominously. Harry probed a step in advance with the broken end of the pole that Alan had flung away. The next step was into the muddy quagmire. Land still lay a mile distant apparently in that direction. The intervening belt was one huge waste expanse of liquid treachery.

They tried again up another tributary, and then a third, and a fourth, and so on through all the radiating minor streamlets, but still always with the same disheartening result. There was no rest for the sole of their foot anywhere. Above, the streams all ended in mud; below, they slowly deepened to the tidal river. A few hundred yards of intervening solid bottom alone provided them with a firm foothold.

"I wish to goodness," Alan cried petulantly, "we'd never got out of that confounded duck-boat!"

"It 's too late wishing now," Harry murmured half to himself, with a remorseful glance at the ill-omened flowers. "We 've got to face the very worst. The tide 's rising. It rises above the level of the mud. Not enough for us to swim in, though. We 'll have to stand here as well as we can on the hard till we can stand no more, and then swim or float for dear life as far as our strength or chance will carry us."

Alan bit his lip in utter despair. He had but one thought now. That thought was for Olga. Olga would miss them! Olga would be frightened! Should he try the riskiest course of all, and swim if possible the long six miles to the pier at Hurdham?

No, no. That after all would be sheer suicide. Better hang on to the last wild chance at all hazards, and wait for the possible approach up stream of a barge or row-boat.

He took out his watch. It was half-past six. They were going upstairs to dress for dinner now at the Tristram's at Thorborough.

"Couldn't we manage to get back on top of the island?" he said at last. "We might wait there then for almost any length of time, till we could signal with a handkerchief to some passing eel-boat. That'd be better at least than waiting here in the middle of the channel till the tide rises."

Harry shook his head with almost sullen despair. "No, no," he cried. "Impossible, impossible! You know how sticky you found the mud. Without the pole we could never by any chance get there. We'd only sink over head and ears in that devilish slush. You don't know the ways of the Thore as well as I do. Sinking in water's bad enough, but sinking in mud's ten thousand times more terrible. It clogs you and hampers you on every side. Struggling or swimming only makes things worse. You go down in it helplessly, suffocating as you go, and there isn't a chance of recovering even your dead body. If we drown in peace and let the tide drift us afterwards down the river, they'll bury us decently anyhow at Thorborough."

Alan went back once more to the neighbourhood of the island. He scanned it eagerly now all round. It was no longer a question of getting a handful of pretty flowers for Olga—it was a pressing urgent life-and-death necessity. But the more he looked at it, the more utterly impossible and impracticable it seemed. Only seven or eight feet of light-brown mud separated them with its gap from that haven of refuge; and yet the seven or eight feet proved

a greater barrier than miles and miles of land or water could ever have done. Water you can swim through, land you can walk over, but mud is absolutely and utterly impassable.

He returned to where Harry sat crouching in the stream, hugging his knees, and gazing blankly and wildly straight in front of him.

"Sit down," Harry said: "this is the highest point. The water here perhaps may not rise above our heads. But we'll have to wait and let it rise slowly. You must sit as long as you can, till tide reaches about to your neck. Then kneel; and after that, stand up and face it. The water rises warm over these basking shallows. If it lay cold, it would be much worse for us. We shall hold out now for about six hours. If a boat comes by, well and good. If not——"

He threw his head back significantly, and closed his eyes, gurgling low with his throat in a speaking pantomime.

Alan thought only of Olga.

They sat there silent in the running water, hugging their knees, for twenty minutes. Then Harry took his handkerchief slowly from his pocket, and tied it to the broken end of the pole.

"We must hold this up, turn about," he said. "Perhaps some boat may pass and see it."

For many minutes, neither spoke again. Then Alan said once more, "Hadn't we better try swimming?"

"No," Harry answered. "For—our friends' sake

—no. Let us wait on the chance. If the worst comes to the worst, at last, we can swim for dear life. But hold on to the hard as long as it serves you."

"Ah, but then we shall be gradually chilled and powerless. If we swim now, we might manage to keep up for dear life—and for what 's dearer than life—till we reached Hurdham."

"Impossible," Harry answered with a shake of his head. "Tide 's against us by this time. If we swam up, as tide now runs, we should only be landed on worse mud-banks in the Ponton direction. Wait till midnight—the turn 's at midnight. Then we might manage to float on our backs, with tide in our favour, and high water too, to one of the firmer islands a little way down towards Thorborough. At high tide, some of them are approachable."

"Till midnight!" Alan cried. "My dear fellow, do you mean to say we must stop here till midnight? All in the dark, and with the water rising everywhere around us? Oh, Harry, Harry, I 'd ten thousand times rather swim for it at once and face it anyhow!"

Harry seized his arm impressively. "It 's your one chance, Tennant," he said in a low firm voice. "Wait! . . . For Olga!"

In a moment Alan noticed the strangeness of the tone.

"For Olga?" he cried. "For Olga? For Olga?"

"Yes," Harry answered, almost bitterly. "Do you think I 'm thinking only of myself? What a coward you must fancy me! We young fellows

always fall in love, they say, with girls older than ourselves. And do you think I haven't fallen in love with Olga Trevelyan? How could I help it? Who could help it? As much as you have, I tell you, Tennant: every bit as much as you have. For her sake, you've got to get back; and for her sake I've got to help you. What's the use of making secrets between us now? I know you love her. I know she loves you. If you don't come back, it'll break her heart. She's got a heart of the kind that's given to breaking. Well, I love her too. I know I'm a young fellow, and I know I shall get over it. In the end, I shall do like all the rest of us, marry some other girl younger than myself, and try to fancy she's as good and as pure and as beautiful as Olga. But while it lasts, it's as real to me as it is to you, I tell you, Tennant. It's Olga who's got us both into this scrape. If I hadn't aided and abetted you this afternoon, you wouldn't have got on the island there, to pick the bunch of flowers for Olga. I helped you, because I knew she'd be pleased that you'd got them for her, and that you'd taken a little trouble to get them—and risked a little danger into the bargain. And now we've both got to get you back to Olga. Never mind about me: that doesn't matter. You're taller than me: you can overtop the water a good half-hour longer. If I get drowned, you can take my body, and put it on the mud by the island yonder, and use it as a stepping-stone to get across upon. I expect it'd

bear you up for a minute; enough to jump safe on to the top of the island. Somebody's sure to be up here with a boat within the next day or two. You could hold out for two or three days even without food, on top of the island, and then you could get back home at last—to Olga."

Alan could answer nothing in return. The tears stood thick in his eyes. He took the young fellow's hand in his and wrung it in silence with a long hard grip.

"Harry," he said at last in a choking voice, "you're a splendid fellow. If we've got to die, we shall die together. Not even for her, not even for her could I ever desert you. Let's tie the flowers around our waists. Then if we die, Olga'll know we died at any rate for her sake."

"No," Harry murmured in a low soft voice. "Let's throw them away: far, far away from us. Then if we die, Olga'll have nothing at all in future to reproach herself with. She'll think we died up the creeks and backwaters looking after the wild-fowl shooting for our own pleasure."

Alan answered never a word. But he felt in his heart that the young man's thought was the truest and noblest. He flung the bunch far from him into the middle of the stream. The rising tide brought it back to his hands, and then carried it vaguely up on its flood among the flats behind them.

CHAPTER XIV.

Suspense.

THE water had now risen up to their waists as they sat dripping in the middle current. They shifted their position, and took to kneeling. The shades began to fall slowly over the land. The stars came out overhead one by one. The gulls and rooks retired in slow procession from the purple mud-flats: the herons rose on flapping wings from fishing in the streams, and stretched their long necks, free and full, homeward towards the heronry.

Nothing on earth could have seemed more awsome in its ghastly loneliness than that wide expanse under the gathering shades of autumn twilight. The water rose slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly. Inch by inch it gained stealthily but steadily upon them. It reached up to their waists, to their sides, to their breasts, to their shoulders. Very soon they would have to cease kneeling, and take to the final standing position. And after that—the deluge!

Bats began to hawk for moths in numbers over the mud-flats. A great white owl hooted from the open sky above. Now and again, the scream of

the sea-swallows, themselves invisible, broke suddenly from the upper air. Even the clang of the hours from the Thorborough church tower floated faintly across the desolate saltings to the place where they waited for slowly-coming death.

"I should like one pipe before I die," Harry said stoically, feeling in his pockets for a box of matches. "You haven't got such a thing as a light about you, have you, Tennant?"

"I've got a flint and steel," Alan answered, pulling it out, "but I'm afraid it's wet with the mud by the island."

He opened the box. To Harry's surprise and delight, the tinder within—a long coil of yellow wick—was dry and untouched, preserved from harm by the metal covering.

"This is better than a match," he cried with new hope. "It's better than a pipe, Tennant. It's a signal: a signal! Keep the tinder alight, and hoist it on the pole, and perhaps it'll attract some one of the mud-anglers."

"Who are the mud-anglers?" Alan asked shivering.

"Men who come out fishing for eels in the streams as the tide rises," Harry answered, fired with fresh expectation. "They walk across the mud, with a lantern in their hands, and catch eels in the tidal channels."

"Walk on the mud!" Alan cried. "But how can they? How can they? And if they can, why can't we too, Harry?"

Harry waved his hand a little impatiently.

"They walk with mud-shoes," he answered with a slight cough. "Mud-shoes are thin flat pieces of board, turned up at the end and strapped on the foot, like small boats; and they glide on them across the mud as people glide with snow-shoes over the snow in Canada. In shape they're very much like the toboggans we used to slide on when I was a boy down the hills at Halifax. You've seen pictures of toboggans in the papers, haven't you? Well, that's a mud-shoe: and the mud-anglers wear them. There are pretty sure to be mud-anglers about to-night, and this light might possibly happen to attract one."

As he spoke, he tore a shred from his handkerchief, and with it fastened the smouldering wick to the broken pole. Below the spark of light thus precariously obtained, he tied the remainder of the handkerchief itself. The wick lighted it up with a faint illumination, and together they served to form a slight danger-signal, sufficient to take the attention of a passing mud-angler, if any should chance to come within sight of the feeble illuminant.

The evening fell darker and darker. The tide rose slowly, remorselessly. The mud-flats ceased to glimmer faintly with the long reflection of the twilight afterglow. All was silent and black and invisible, save for the shrill cry of the bats as they swooped overhead, and the tiny glow of the saltpetre tinder-wick on the flapping handkerchief.

The water compelled them now to stand. Arm-

in-arm they stood before it, facing together that crawling, slow, resistless enemy. If it had been waves to buffet and overcome, however fierce, even that would have been better. One would have felt then one was at least fighting them. But the utter sense of helplessness and impotence in face of that quiet, noiseless creeping flood was too appalling. Harry's teeth began to chatter with cold. The long immersion, even in that sun-warmed water, was gradually telling upon him. His limbs were stiff, and his blood coursed slowly.

They passed the pipe silently from one to the other, for Alan's last cigar was long since finished. It helped to warm and comfort them a little.

"Thank heaven," Harry said with real fervour as he took it once from his friend's mouth, "thank heaven for tobacco."

Half-past eight. Nine. Half-past nine. The bell clanged it out loudly from the Thorborough steeple, and the echoes stole reverberant with endless resonance across the lonely intervening mud-flats. How long the intervals seemed between! Twenty times in every half-hour the two young men lowered the slowly smouldering wick, and held Harry's watch up to the light, to read how the minutes went on its dial. Half-past nine, and now breast high! Ten, eleven, twelve, still to run! The water would rise far above their heads! Each minute now was an eternity of agony. Save for Olga's sake, they would have taken to swimming, and flung away the last chance of life reck-

lessly. It is easier to swim—and die at once—than to stand still, with the cruel cold water creeping slowly and ceaselessly up you.

At twenty-five minutes to ten, they lowered the light and looked once more. As they did so, a faint long gleam streaming along the mud-flats struck Harry's eyes in the far distance. The light from which it came lay below their horizon; but the gleam itself, repeated and reflected, hit the side of the bank opposite them. Harry's quick senses jumped at it in a moment.

"A mud-angler! A mud-angler!" he cried excitedly, and waved the pole and handkerchief above with a sudden access of feverish energy.

Would the mud-angler see them? that was the question. The flicker of the wick was but very slight. How far off could it possibly be visible? They waved it frantically on the bare chance of attracting his attention.

For five minutes there was an awful suspense; and then Harry's accustomed ear caught a faint noise borne dimly across the long low mud-flats.

"He's coming! He's coming!" he cried joyously. And then putting his two hands to his mouth, he burst into a long, sharp, shrill coo-ee.

"You'll frighten him away!" Alan suggested anxiously. "He'll think it's a ghost or something like one."

But even as he spoke, the gleam of a lantern struck upon the mud, and the light shone clearer and ever clearer before them.

"Hallo!" Harry cried. "In distress here! Help! help! We're drowning! We're drowning!"

A man's voice answered from above. "Ahoy! ahoy! How did yow git there?"

Thank heaven! they were saved!—Or next door to it!

The man approached the edge of the mud-bank as close as he dare (for the edges are very steep and slippery), and turning his lantern full upon them, stood looking at the two half-drowned men, as they gasped up to their breasts in water.

"How did yow git there, I say?" he asked once more sullenly.

"Can you help us out?" Harry cried in return.

The man shook his head.

"Dunno as I can!" he answered with a stupid grin. "I can't go no nearer the edge nor this. It's bad walking. Mud's deep. How did yow git there?"

"Waded up, and our boat floated off," Harry cried in despair. "Can't you get a rope? Can't you send a boat? Can't you do anything anyhow to help us?"

The man gazed at them with the crass and vacant stupidity of the born rustic.

"Dunno as I can," he muttered once more. "Yow'd ought to 'a stuck to your boat, yow 'ad. That's just what yow'd ought to 'a done, I take it."

"Is there a boat anywhere near?" Alan cried

distracted. "Couldn't you put any boat out from somewhere to save us?"

"There ain't no boat," the man answered slowly and stolidly. "Leastways none nearer nor Thorborough. Or might be 'Urdham. Tom Wilkes, 'e 'ave a boat up yonder at Ponton. But that 's right across t'other side o' the water." And he gazed at them still with rural indifference.

"My friend," Alan cried, with a burst of helplessness, "we 've been here in the water since six o'clock. The tide 's rising slowly around us. In a couple of hours, it 'll rise above our heads. We 're faint and cold and almost exhausted. For heaven's sake don't stand there idle: can't you do something to save two fellow-creatures from drowning?"

The man shook his head imperturbably once more.

"I dunno as I can," he murmured complacently. "Mud hereabouts is terrible dangerous. Yow 'd ought to 'a stuck to your boat, yow know. There ain't no landing anywheres hereabouts. If I was to give yow a hand, I 'd fall in, myself. I expect yow 'll have to stick there now till yow 're right drownded. I can't git no nearer yow nohow."

There was something utterly appalling and sickening in this horrible outcome of all their hopes. The longed-for mud-angler had arrived at last: they had caught his attention: they were within speaking distance of him: there he stood,

on the edge of the ooze, lantern in hand, and wooden floats on feet, plainly visible before their very eyes: yet for any practical purpose of assistance or relief he might just as well have been a hundred miles on shore clean away at a distance from them. A stick or a stone could not have been more utterly or horribly useless.

The man stood and gazed at them still. If they had only allowed him, he would have gazed imperturbably open-mouthed till the waters had risen above their heads and drowned them. He had the blank stolidity of silly Suffolk well developed in his vacant features.

Alan was seized with a happy inspiration. He would use the one obvious argument adapted to the stupid sordid soul of the gaping mud-angler.

"Go back to the shore," he cried, glaring at the fellow, "and tell the others we're here drowning. Do as you're told. Don't delay. Bring a boat or something at once to save us. If you do, you shall have fifty pounds. If you don't, they'll hang you for murder. Fifty pounds if you save us, do you understand me? Fifty pounds to-morrow morning!"

The man's lower jaw dropped heavily.

"Fifty pound," he repeated, with a cunning leer.

It was too much. Clearly he didn't believe it possible.

"Fifty pounds," Alan reiterated with the energy of despair, taking out his purse and looking at its

contents. "And there's three pound ten on account, as an earnest."

He tied the purse with all that was in it on to the end of the pole and pushed it up to the man, who clutched at it eagerly. Looking inside, he saw the gold, and grinned.

"Fifty pound!" he said with a sudden chuckle. "That's a powerful lot o' money, Mister."

"Go quick," Alan cried, "and tell your friends. There's not a moment to be lost, and tide's rising. If you can bring a boat or do anything to save us, you shall have fifty pounds, down on the nail, to-morrow morning. I'm a rich man, and I can promise to pay you."

The fellow turned doggedly and began to go. Next moment, a nascent doubt came over him, and clouded his mind.

"How shall I know where to find yow?" he said, staring back once more, and gaping foolishly.

"Watch the beacons," Harry cried, taking up the parable, "and mark which stream we're in as well as you're able. Let's see. How long shall you be gone, do you reckon?"

"Might be an hour," the man answered, drawling. "Might be two hours."

"The light won't last so long," Harry said anxiously, turning to Alan. "I say, my friend, can't you leave us your lantern?"

The man shook his head with a gesture of dissent.

"Couldn't find my way back nohow without

it," he said still grinning. "Fifty pound! That 's a lot o' money."

"Go!" Alan cried, unable any longer to keep down for very prudence' sake his contempt and anger. "Go and tell your other fishermen. If you want to earn your fifty pounds to-night, there 's no time to spare. When you come back, we may both be dead men, if you don't go on and hurry.—Harry, we can light the wick again at eleven o'clock. Let 's put it out now. We can do without it. We shall hear the church clock strike the hours."

The man nodded a stolid acquiescence, and turned once more slowly on his heel. They watched him silently receding—receding. Light and reflection faded gradually away. The faint plash of his wooden mud-shoes on the flat surface was heard no more. Nothing remained save the gurgling of the water. They were left alone—alone with the darkness.

That second loneliness was lonelier than ever. Too cold to speak, almost too cold even to hope, they stood there still, linked arm-in-arm, ready to faint, with the speechless stars burning bright overhead, and the waters rising pitilessly around them. In that last moment, Alan's thoughts were turned to Olga. Beautiful, innocent, gentle-souled Olga. If he died that night, he died, on however petty an errand it might be, for Olga's sake—for Olga—for Olga. And then he relapsed into a kind of chilly stupor.

CHAPTER XV.

High Tide.

EN o'clock. . . . Half-past ten. . . . Eleven. Numbed and half-dead, they heard the clock strike out, as in some ghastly dream, and waited and watched for the return of the mud-angler.

It wasn't so very far to the shore. Surely, surely, he should be back by this time.

The waters in the estuary rose by slow, by almost imperceptible degrees. But still they rose. They went on rising. They were up to Harry's neck now. He rested his chin on the edge of the water. Five minutes more, and all would be up. Faint and weary, he would fall in the channel.

"Look here, Tennant," he murmured at last, grasping his friend's hand beneath the surface in a hard long grip: "I 'm going to swim now. It 's no use waiting. I 've only got five minutes to live. . . . I mustn't stop here. If I stop, you know, when the water rises, I shall choke and struggle. Then you 'll clutch me hold, and try to save me, and that 'll spoil your own last chance of living. I 'm going to swim. It won't be far. But it 's better at any rate than dying like a dog with a stone round its neck, still here on the bottom. Good-bye, old fellow. Good-bye for ever. Never

let Olga know, if you get back safe, what it was we did it for!"

Alan held him hard with whatever life was yet left in him.

"Stop, stop, Harry," he cried in dismay. "There's still a chance. Every minute's a chance. Don't go, don't go. Stop with me, for heaven's sake, and if we must die, let's die together."

"No, no," Harry answered in a resolute voice. "You've got half-an-hour's purchase of life better than I have, now, Tennant. For Olga's sake, you must let me go. For Olga's sake, you must try to save yourself."

"Never," Alan cried, firmly and hastily. "Not even for Olga's sake! Never! Never!"

At that moment, a loud shout of enquiry resounded over the mud-flats! A noise of men! A glimmer of lanterns! Alan seized his friend, and lifted him in his arms.

"Saved! Saved!" he cried. "Shout, Harry! Shout! Shout, shout, my dear, dear Harry!"

Harry shouted aloud with a long wild cry. It was the despairing cry of a dying man, and it echoed and re-echoed along the undulating mud-flats.

Alan lighted the wick, which he had held all this time for dryness in his teeth, and fitted it once more into the crack of the pole. Harry waved it madly about over his head. One moment more of deadly suspense. Then an answering cry told them at last that the men with the lanterns saw them and heard them

Next instant, the men were on the brink of the mud, and the light of the lanterns poured full upon them.

A voice very different from that of their friend the mud-angler shouted aloud in a commanding tone, "Shove off the raft! Look out for your heads there!"

Before they knew exactly what it was that was happening, a great square raft, roughly improvised from two cottage doors, nailed together by cross-pieces, floated on the stream full in front of them; and Alan, scrambling on to it with a violent struggle, lifted up the faint and weary Harry in his arms to the dry and solid place of safety.

The men pulled them alongside with two ropes attached to the raft; and the same voice that had spoken first said once more in kindly tones, "Brandy, hot. Take a good pull at it! Don't be afraid. Next, your turn. . . . After that, this. A pull o' soup. It 'll warm your heart, man. Now, sit on the raft and recover a little."

Alan sat on the raft giddily, as he was bid, and laid Harry's head on his lap like a woman. One of the men—not their mud-angler—pulled off his dry jersey at once, and handed it over to Alan with native kindliness. Alan laid it under Harry's head. The poor fellow was half fainting, half asleep with exhaustion. They gave him more beef-tea, and more brandy. He revived slowly; and meanwhile, the raft lay idle alongside, the men in mud-shoes standing on the bank and looking over.

"We must get along soon," one of them said, after a pause. "Water's rising. Soon be over

the flats. Can you walk?" kindly, to Allen. And he held up a pair of mud-shoes in his hand to explain his question.

"I never tried them," Alan answered, looking at them dubiously: "but I dare say I could. Anyhow, I'll risk it."

He sat on the raft and put them on as the man directed him. Then they reached down a pole, which the four men held; and with it they lifted him up on to the mud-bank. He took his stand there uneasily enough.

"Don't fall, whatever you do," the chief speaker said encouragingly; "and don't stumble. Glide along on 'em the same as if you was skating. Keep from stumbling, and you'll be all right. Are you getting warmer? Have another pull at the soup, and a bit o' biscuit."

Alan ate the proffered food thankfully. Thank heaven, their first mud-angling acquaintance was no fair sample of the whole fraternity.

"Now for the other one," the speaker continued. "It ain't no good giving *him* mud-shoes. He ain't in no fit state at all for walking. We must drag him along somehow on the raft, Billy. Here you, sir; hold on to the raft. Now, all together! Heave him up! heave oh!"

The four men took hold of the ropes at once, and pulled the raft, with Harry on it, over the shelving bank, now nearly level with the rising water, and on to the mud-flats. Then they tied the two ropes firmly to the pole: placed it in front of them as a sort of support or axletree, and all

pulling at it, with Alan in the middle, began to make their way shoreward.

They struck across the flats by the nearest way, walking slowly, on Alan's account, and dragging the raft easily behind them. It sank slightly in the mud as they went, but not much; and the men pulled it as if well accustomed to that singular conveyance.

After only a few hundred yards of mud, Alan was perfectly astonished to find that they reached the dyke and the reclaimed marshes. So near had they been all the time to land in one direction, and yet so dangerously far and remote from it.

"We couldn't come sooner," the chief speaker explained kindly to Alan, noticing his surprise. "Billy came"—pointing to their first friend, the mud-angler—"and told us at once all about you. But I knowed it was no use going on the search till we could do something practical-like to save you; and there wasn't a minute to spare, I'll warrant you. In half an hour, the flats'll be covered: as soon as they're covered, the mud's soft, and there ain't no possibility o' walking on it. We'd got to hunt up two more men, and a couple o' vacant pairs o' mud-shoes: and as all the lot was out on the flats, that wasn't none so easy neither. Then we'd got to take down them there two doors, and nail 'em together, and put the ropes to 'em: and it's precious lucky we thought o' doing it. For if you'd had nobody but Billy and them to help you,"—here his voice sank to a confidential whisper,—"it's my belief, in the manner o' speaking, you'd both ha' been drownded just as you stood there."

Alan saw at once in his own mind the wisdom of his new friend's well-arranged plan. To have gone out on the mere impulse, unprovided with the necessary assistance of the raft, would have been worse than useless: the men could only have gazed at them helplessly from the edge of the ooze as their stolid acquaintance Billy had begun by doing. Still, it was awful to think that they had had to stop there drowning by inches while the men on shore were quietly taking down the cottage doors and rudely knocking the extemporised raft and planks together. They might at least have sent somebody on beforehand to tell them help would soon be coming! And then, he reflected once more on the utter loneliness of those wild saltings, with their solitary huts scattered about at long distances, and recognised immediately that the men had acted for the very best,—had done the only thing possible for them. Lucky indeed that one man at least was found among the mud-anglers with a strong hand and a cool head, for if they had been left entirely to the mercy of Billy and his like-minded associates, they might, as their new friend rightly said, still be drowning by inches in the dark estuary!

The men kicked off their mud-shoes dexterously, and piled them up in a low shed, thatched with rushes, on the very edge of the drained saltings. Then without a word, and as if by signal given, they lifted up Alan and Harry between them, two and two, and carried them across the steaming fields to a small cottage. It was the home of the

man who had directed the others—Tom Wilkes, the captain of the mud-anglers. Late as it was, the women were sitting up to receive them: a bright wood fire burnt merrily on the kitchen hearth; and a steaming kettle hissed in the midst of it. They laid them in chairs close to the fireside; removed their wet clothes hastily, and wrapped them round as they stood in dry blankets. The fire and food soon revived Harry: and the men carried him upstairs to a bed, where he was soon asleep and comfortably settled.

As for Alan, worn out as he was, his first idea was to get back to Thorborough at all hazards. Olga would be waiting anxiously to hear about him. Could he borrow a horse and ride home alone?

Tom Wilkes shook his head in a decided negative. There wasn't a horse for three miles about—nothing but sheep and cattle on the saltings: and as to Thorborough, it was t'other side river, and river spread in fingers and fingers, with saltings between, so that there wasn't no bridge without you went round right away by Winningham.

In those lonely peninsulas of Suffolk and Essex, indeed, spots may be found more utterly isolated from the outer world than any to be seen in Wales or Scotland—saltings cut off by interminable backwaters and interlacing estuaries from any intercourse save in one long straight line, with surrounding districts. It was only six miles, as the crow flies, from Tom Wilkes's cottage to the church at Thorborough; yet the road by land led ten miles inland, and then fifteen miles more round to avoid the rivers.

There was no hope for it. Anxious as he was, Alan was positively compelled to sleep at the cottage, and early next morning, he mentally resolved, he would walk with his host to the nearest "hard" or landing-place, and there hire a boat to take him to Thorborough.

He went to bed, and with the aid of more brandy, poured down hot, soon fell asleep, from sheer fatigue and weariness. For an hour or more he slept very soundly—the deep sleep that succeeds exhaustion. Then about two o'clock, he awoke with a sudden start. He had dreamt something. A cold perspiration seized upon his limbs. He shuddered and listened. In his dream he fancied he had heard some noise! A stifled cry! A suppressed groan! A faint utterance! he knew not what. It seemed to come, not from the room where he slept, but, vaguely floating, from the air above him. He sat up in bed and listened again. It was only the beating and fluttering of his own heart.

"I hope to goodness nothing 's the matter with Olga," he said to himself wearily. "I felt as if something—something terrible, were happening over yonder to Olga! Poor child! she 'll be half dead with fright at our stopping away. How absurd of me to wake and feel like this! I 'm almost superstitious myself to-night! No wonder, either, after such an adventure on death's brink as that one!"

In five minutes more, the shudder had passed away entirely: he turned round, fell asleep again, and slept soundly till eight in the morning.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Bubble Pricked.

T eight o'clock, Alan rose and dressed himself, in a shirt and jersey and pair of sailor trousers, coarse, indeed, but dry and warm, lent him by their kindly host and rescuer of last evening. Sleep had done him a world of good. Accustomed to exposure in his student days, he rallied fast with food and warmth; and when he went down at last to the simple breakfast in the cottage living-room, he was ready to do full justice to the smoking rasher, and home-made bread, and hot coffee, that Tom Wilkes's wife set temptingly before him.

Harry, however, had suffered far more. Exhaustion and chill had told severely upon him. He was hot and feverish. It would be impossible to move him from the cottage for the present. He must clearly stop there till he got well again. There was no danger, but need for nursing. Meanwhile, Alan felt, for his own part, he must go back at once to Thorborough to report to Olga. Poor Olga, she would be wondering sadly what fate on earth could possibly have befallen them!

After breakfast, he said a temporary good-bye to Harry—not without many regrets—and walked briskly with his host by the salting footpath as far as Hurdham. There, at the little wooden pier, they found a boat, and sailed with a lucky wind against the rising tide to the well-known landing-place at Thorborough Haven. In ten minutes from their arrival, Alan was up at the hotel, had written out a cheque for the promised reward (not that Tom Wilkes himself cared so much for that), and had settled once more with infinite comfort into his proper garments. Then, without waiting for anything else, he hurried along the Shell Path with eager footsteps till he reached Mrs. Hilary Tristram's door. His heart bounded as he rang the bell! One moment more, and he would be with Olga!

The servant opened the door to him with a scared face.

"You can't see Miss Trevelyan," she answered at once, in reply to his twice repeated question. "She's upstairs. . . . I don't think anybody at all can see her. She's with Mrs. Tristram. I b'lieve Sir Donald has sent out for the policeman."

"For the policeman!" Alan cried, aghast at the words, and still more at the manner in which they were spoken. "Sent for the policeman! For Miss Trevelyan! Oh no, oh no! There must be some mistake. What in heaven's name do you mean to say, girl?"

The girl drew back, half offended, at his words and held the door ajar cautiously.

"I mean what I say," she answered with a slow and distinct intonation. "Miss Norah's murdered! She's lying dead on the bed upstairs. There's a great black ring round her poor neck. And they say it was Miss Trevelyan herself as did it. As true as life, Miss Trevelyan's choked her."

While she yet spoke, Olga's face appeared, pale as death, with sunken eyes and haggard cheeks, at the top of the staircase. She had heard Alan's voice as he stood at the door, and even in that hour of anguish and despair, she rushed down wildly to fling herself and her griefs upon his strong bosom.

"Alan! Alan!" she cried, as she clasped him with mad energy in her arms. "You're safe! You're safe!—Yes, I did it! I did it! It was Kalee—Kalee! Kalee bid me! I am Kalee's, Kalee's: I belong to Kalee! That's why I always sleep with my eyes open! My ayah told me so when I was a baby!"

Alan looked down at her in a sudden agony of pity and terror. His practised eye needed no long detail of her present symptoms to read the true secret of the ghastly story. She was half in a trance even now—even now—still comatose and frantic from the last effects of that hateful mesmerism.

"Olga, Olga, my darling," he cried, holding her off at arm's length and gazing at her for a moment. "I know it all! I see it all! What have they

been doing to you? Did the creature mesmerise you?"

Mrs. Tristram approached them gently from behind.

"Olga," she said, in a calm low voice, with her red eyes looking only tenderness at the frantic girl, "come with me, love. Mr. Tennant, you will find Sir Donald and Mr. Keen over yonder in the breakfast-room. They will tell you all about our terrible trouble.—Norah is dead. Where is Harry?"

She said it simply, with the infinite calmness of pure despair. Her heart was broken. Those two had been more to her than son and daughter. Yet she took Olga's hand gently in her own. She owed her no grudge for that unconscious act. Her grief was far too profound and sacred for petty thoughts of bitterness or recrimination.

"Harry is safe!" Alan answered eagerly. "He will soon be back. We were delayed all night. I left him going on well in a cottage on the saltings. . . . This cannot be true, Mrs. Tristram. It cannot be true. She is not dead. There is some error somewhere."

Mrs. Tristram led the passive Olga upstairs once more, shook her head sadly, and pointed with her hand in solemn silence to the door of the breakfast-room. She could not explain. It was too, too painful.

Alan entered the breakfast-room with a sinking heart. Sir Donald and Mr. Keen were conversing low by themselves at the bow-window.

They turned at once as Alan entered.

"This is a bad business, Mr. Tennant," Sir Donald said solemnly as the young man looked at him with accusing eyes. "I feared as much. I told you so before. The curse has worked itself out. There's mischief come of it."

"Sir Donald Mackinnon," Alan said in a stern voice, not offering the grey old man his hand, but standing bolt upright like a denouncing spirit before him, "answer me one thing first of all! Is it true you have dared to send for the police for Miss Trevelyan?"

Sir Donald stared at him in blank surprise.

"Not yet, not yet," he answered evasively as soon as he could find his voice again:—"though I feel as a magistrate I ought to have sent for them much earlier. There's been murder done, and we should hand the culprit over impartially to justice. She may have known it, or she may not have known it: but that's for a jury of her countrymen to try. *We* mustn't go and settle it for them beforehand. I meant. . . I meant to send Mr. Keen shortly to get the police here."

The young man eyed him with a calm disdain. Sir Donald quailed a little tremulously before him. He looked so stern, and cold, and judicial.

"Sir Donald Mackinnon," he said again, in a hard dry tone, "answer me one more question, will you? Were you a party in my absence last night to mesmerising (as they call it) Miss Trevelyan?"

Sir Donald shuffled somewhat in his shoes.

"Mr. Keen," he said, with an attempt at hauteur, "will tell you all about it."

The mesmerist smiled feebly out of the wrinkled corners of his cold glazed eyes—those expressionless grey-blue eyes of his—and murmured with an apologetic and exculpatory wave of his long thin fingers,

"I don't understand Hindustani myself. There was Hindustani spoken at the experiment. I think Sir Donald, who knows it, had better tell you."

Neither of them, on second thoughts, felt particularly proud of his own share in the transaction, it was evident. However, Alan somewhat saved them the trouble by catching instinctively at the fatal tell-tale word Hindustani.

"Hindustani!" he cried. "Then there was Hindustani spoken! Before you venture, sir, to send for the police to this house, have the goodness to tell me, pray, who spoke Hindustani?"

"I did," Sir Donald replied nervously. He twirled his watch-chain, and cast down his eyes, ill at ease no doubt with his own conscience.

"Tell me all you know about the circumstances," Alan said, in a low tone of quiet authority.

The old civilian bridled up for a moment. Who was this young doctor that he should order and cross-examine an officer of the Crown? Then, seeing the stern look still glaring in the young man's eyes, he changed his mind, began his tale, and ran rapidly through the whole pitiful story, as it figured itself as of course to his superstitious Highland imagination.

Alan faced him in silence, flushed and angry. The mesmerist stood behind, with a furtive glance, folding his long thin hands a little nervously one over the other. Sir Donald hummed and hawed occasionally, but told his terrible story on the whole without demur, in plain and straightforward soldier-like language.

Alan drank in every word as he uttered it with eager attention, noting it all down, point after point, as the superstitious Highlander unconsciously unfolded the rise and outgrowth of that deadly tragedy in his own excited and pre-occupied brain.

At last, when the old man had fully finished speaking, Alan drew back a pace or two in wrath, and said in a low, distinct voice,

"Sir Donald Mackinnon and Mr. Keen: you do well to stand there covered with confusion. This is a very bad business indeed for you. There has been a conspiracy—perhaps an unconscious one, but still a conspiracy—between you two to work this mischief. If murder has been done, it is YOU who are the murderers! . . . You, you, not that innocent young girl! . . . You, sir, and you; YOU WHO ARE THE MURDERERS!"

Sir Donald fell back a step, astonished and dismayed.

"Me!" he repeated, vacantly and half-angrily. "Me the murderer! Me, did you say, Mr. Tennant? Why, what in heaven's name do you mean by that, sir?"

Alan answered slowly and distinctly, crossing his arms, and gazing at him with relentless accusation.

"Miss Trevelyan is a very nervous and excitable person. Her temperament is too highly overstrung. She suffers from a peculiar affection of the eyes—due no doubt, as you say, to an operation performed on her in infancy by some Thug priest over in India,—which renders her particularly liable to occasional fits of hysterical somnambulism. I myself have seen her walk in her sleep since I came to Thorborough. You too, I now for the first time learn, also saw her on that same occasion. Those two facts put together suggested to your mind a hideous delusion. For weeks you have talked to her about India and her childhood. You have filled her head with wild and horrible ideas about Thuggee. Having a very timid and delicate nervous organisation to work upon, you have worked upon it mercilessly—unconsciously, I know, but none the less mercilessly—by endless details about the practice of assassination and the worship of Kalee. You have recalled to the poor girl's terrified mind all that she ever heard or guessed or picked up accidentally from servants in India in her childish days about the ghastly Thugs and their detestable goddess. You have roused her to such a pitch of abnormal excitement that snatches of Hindustani, long since forgotten, came back to her of themselves in her disturbed sleep, and horrible images dogged her and terrified her in her waking moments. All this you have

done under my very eyes: I knew it all and saw it all: but because you were an old man, and I was a young one, I foolishly forbore to warn you and expostulate with you. I wish to heaven, now, I had had the courage to do so earlier."

He paused a moment, to gain more breath: and as he spoke, a faint gleam of nascent comprehension seemed to rise slowly in the dull, glazed, boiled-fishy eyes of the professional mesmerist.

"So much you had done, and so far you had gone, Sir Donald Mackinnon," Alan went on bitterly, holding up his finger to enforce silence, "up to last evening. Had I been here, you should have gone no further. I warned Miss Bickersteth not to allow your guest over yonder to mesmerise my future wife on any account. I meant myself to have seen that the prohibition was carried into effect had I been here. I knew that in her existing nervous state—shattered as her health has been by so many recent occurrences—to trifle with her constitution would be little short of deliberate criminality. But, driven on by your puerile superstition—a superstition of the lowest Indian fanatics,—you thought nothing of that—you thought nothing of her—you thought nothing of me—you thought nothing of anything but your own wild fancies. You only wished to bring about evil, in order that you might have the feminine delight of wagging your head sapiently, when all was over, and saying, as you now say, 'Ah, well, I told you so.' That foolish delight you have actually exhibited to me here this morning. And

I stand in front of you as your accuser this moment, telling you plainly, if murder has been done, as I fear it has been done, that I charge you with the murder. You, you, you are the murderer!"

Sir Donald grasped the back of a chair with trembling fingers. His head swam. The young man's words were very bitter, but the provocation was indeed terrible. It began to dawn upon his dull, superstitious, heavy mind that he had richly deserved them.

"Me," he muttered once more, with feeble reiteration. "Me the murderer! Me the murderer! Oh, Mr. Tennant, don't, don't accuse me!"

"Yes," Alan went on, with increasing sternness, unable to spare the quivering old man one single drop from the full cup of his overflowing misery. "I was detained last night by a terrible accident, which kept young Bickersteth and myself lingering for hours between life and death in the rising tide in unspeakable suspense and long-drawn agony. I come back, this morning, trembling with fear for the effect of our absence on Miss Trevelyan, to find that you two, with your infernal tricks, and your mesmeric devilry, have driven my future wife in her unnatural sleep into committing a horrible but unconscious crime. You two have done it, and you two only. You, sir," turning fiercely upon Mr. Keen, "put her first into a mesmeric trance, without one moment's enquiry into her character or constitution or previous state of health. To do so was nothing short of wickedness. You are a practised mesmerist. You know that your whole

art really consists in playing with edge-tools. Yet you play with them unconcernedly, on an innocent young girl, for a moment's applause at an evening party. You, Sir Donald Mackinnon, then proceed to suggest by your vague words and obscure hints to Miss Trevelyan's excited fancy the commission of a horrible and tragic crime; and you suggest it at the very moment and in the very condition when, as you well know and had just seen in another case, the wildest and most impossible of all conceivable suggestions is immediately acted out with unquestioning faith by the involuntary agent. You knew her will was in temporary abeyance. You knew her conscience was in your safe keeping. You knew she must do whatever you suggested to her. Yet you dimly suggested the commission of an atrocious murder, borrowed from the rites of a half-civilised race, with every circumstance of horror and stealth and blood-thirstiness, on the person of a friend whom she loved devotedly. You saw her carry out your half-hints to the very letter, and only refrain from the last fatal act and step of all because you roused her just in time from her mesmeric trance to prevent its taking place in your own presence. You saw her wake, horror-stricken and agonised, at the faint recollection of the unnatural crime you had deliberately forced upon her. I know it, because I hear you say it. You have told me all this in your own words and with your own prepossessions. Out of your own mouth, I condemn you as a murderer."

He wiped the cold sweat tremulously from his brow. Then he continued once more with his merciless exposition.

"You were so full of your foolish supernatural explanation," he said, "that you never once thought of the natural and true explanation. Believing in the real existence of Kalee, it seems, quite as genuinely as the wretched Thugs themselves who worship her, you accepted Kalee's orders as the moving power of what was really brought about in the sleeping girl's mind by your own terrible and unearthly suggestion. Miss Trevelyan went to her room only half aroused, under the influence of the ghastly delusion your hints had created in her. You never asked whether any precaution had been taken or was to be taken to prevent the final catastrophe you had so nearly seen consummated. You were satisfied to leave it all to Kalee—that is to say, to the unconscious working out of your own wild hints and hideous imaginings. By an unfortunate error of judgment,—a thousand times less serious and criminal than yours, but still a terrible error,—the medical man, who ought to have known better, administered a drug which kept up instead of allaying the abnormal excitement. It rendered the delusion more fixed and permanent. That delusion still survives. I saw it at once in Miss Trevelyan's eyes the moment I entered. We must try to overcome it. But for it and for everything you, you are to blame. I say it once more, soberly and seriously, Sir Donald Mackinnon, YOU ARE THE MURDERER!"

Sir Donald sank back faintly into a chair. The young doctor's words smote him to the heart. In a vague, nascent, half-doubting way, he began to feel now that he had done it all. There was no Kalee! There had never been a Kalee! There could be no Kalee! Superstitious as he was, the old man shrank from admitting even to himself, when brought thus face to face with that ultimate question, the existence and power of the strange gods.

"I didn't mean it!" he muttered feebly in an undertone. "I never meant to suggest anything. I only said she was noosing a roomal. I thought the girl was a votary of Kalee!"

"You admit the charge," Alan cried bitterly. "You confess! You admit it! That is well, so far. But what will a common-sense English jury say to it? Will they listen to reason? Will they ever acquit her? Do you know what ordeal you have brought upon my Olga?"

He could contain himself no longer. All his force and wrath was spent and gone. The terrible possibility of a trial for murder for the woman he loved best in the world overcame him at last. He realised the thing vividly in its full awfulness. Bowing his head, broken hearted, upon the table, he wept bitterly.

CHAPTER XVII.

Hope.

THE mesmerist paced the room alone. "If a murder has been done," he said slowly, "we two are the murderers. I admit it. I see it. I know my art. The young man is right. Mackinnon led her into it. But *has* a murder been done at all? Eh? Who knows? I don't feel sure of it. That's just the question."

Alan raised his head in an agony of suspense. "Who has seen Miss Bickersteth?" he asked hurriedly. "Does Dr. Hazleby give up all hope? In cases of suffocation, it's so easy at times to confound death with temporary asphyxia. Has everything been tried—every possible restorative? What has been done for her? tell me! tell me!"

"Nothing, nothing!" Sir Donald Mackinnon exclaimed with a glimpse of hope. "Hazleby's out—gone over to Hurdham. Nobody's seen her but Keen and myself and Mrs. Tristram. We thought she was dead! She looked it, certainly. She's almost cold, and her pulse isn't beating."

Alan leaped excitedly at once to his feet.

"Do you mean to tell me," he cried in surprise and horror, "that you 've given her up before any medical man has even seen her? A case of stran-

gulation! Fools! Idiots! I must go this moment! Where is she? Where is she?"

They hurried upstairs with him to Norah's room, where Olga and Mrs. Tristram sat hand-in-hand, tearless, by the bedside, absorbed in that most devouring and grinding of griefs, the grief that cannot find relief in weeping.

Olga shrank with horror from her lover's gaze as he entered the room.

"Oh, Alan, Alan," she cried, gasping, "don't come near me! Don't touch me! Don't touch me! I know I did it! I know I did it! I killed Norah, and I belong to Kalee!"

Alan motioned her gently aside with his hand. He knew it was no time now to soothe her. A servant led her, obedient and unnerved, into the next room. She followed the girl, silent but tearless.

The young doctor felt the pulse and heart a moment. Then a great joy flushed bright in his eyes.

"There is hope! There is hope!" he cried. "Artificial respiration! A flutter! A flutter! The heart may yet be made to beat. Quick, quick. Brandy! Lay her down on the floor here! Lift her arms! So, so! Now again! Do as I tell you. There is hope! There is hope! She is *not* yet dead, though just next door to it! We may revive her still! Heaven grant us success in it."

They waited anxiously for twenty minutes, try-

ing every restorative that Alan's skill and knowledge could possibly suggest; and at the end of that time, Norah slowly drew one long faint breath . . . and then another . . . and another . . . and another . . . and another.

Great heavens! what an eternity of suspense it seemed, the second's pause between each of those almost imperceptible inhalations!

Alan poured some brandy hastily down her throat. It seemed to rouse her. Her heart beat now with regular pulsations. She was coming to! She was coming to again!

They watched and waited, watched and waited, watched and waited, till one o'clock. Then Norah opened her eyes faintly.

"Is she here? Is she here?" she cried, staring wildly around her. "The black woman! The black woman! the terrible black woman!"

"Hush! Hush!" Alan whispered. "There is no black woman. We are all here. We are taking care of you. See, this is your aunt!—Hold her hand, Mrs. Tristram. Let her see your face now. . . . Norah! Norah!"

But Norah gazed still wildly in front of her.

"Kalee! Kalee!" she cried in terrified accents. "The snakes! The snakes! The handkerchief! The black woman! Her great eyes! Her cruel black mouth! Her pearly white teeth, that smiled so horribly!"

Alan turned with a stern look to Sir Donald Mackinnon.

"See, see," he said, "with your own very eyes,

the harm you have done here! You have put it into both their minds at once—the tool and the victim. It 's a fixed idea, and we can't get rid of it. They 've acted their parts, each as you suggested to them—one the Thug, the other the sacrifice. They 're both of them still half in the mesmeric state, and the haschish has had the effect of prolonging the delusion. If she keeps this infatuation, in her present weak state, for another hour, she 'll die of terror! she 'll die of terror! We shall save her from one death only to hand her over powerless to another!"

Mr. Keen, who had been helping to promote the artificial breathing, stood forth once more with a fixed look of contrition. He was deeply moved, in spite of his livid eyes: he knew and felt to the very bottom of his soul the harm he had been instrumental in doing.

"Let *me* try," he said, holding out his long thin hands persuasively. "They were both very hard to wake last night. I expended, perhaps, too much energy in mesmerising them. They were only very partially awakened. She 's still more or less comatose, I can see at a glance. I 'll try a few passes. Perhaps they 'll rouse her."

He waved his hand slowly and gently above the prostrate form of the pale young girl, and fixed his eyes quietly on hers. For a moment, Norah's face grew still more painfully excited: then the muscles gradually and gently relaxed, beginning to assume a more peaceful expression. As he continued his passes, the eyes ceased to stare

wildly. The eyelids closed by slow degrees above them. Her head fell back into a natural restful attitude on the pillow.

"You haven't waked her," Alan said with a long-drawn sigh of profound relief: "but you've done better; you've put her into a sound and normal sleep. Leave her alone now till she wakes of herself. Nothing on earth could possibly be better for her."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Fulfilment.

" HERE'S Olga?" Alan asked, at last, turning with a sigh to Mrs. Hilary Tristram.

"In the next room, I suppose," the poor woman answered low, holding Norah's white hand gently in her own. "Oh, Mr. Tennant, Mr. Tennant, how can we ever sufficiently thank you! Twice, twice, you've given us back our darling!"

Alan held her other hand a moment with friendly pressure.

"We have all been saved," he said, "from a terrible calamity. I myself from the most terrible and unspeakable of all. I dare not think of it. I dare not speak of it. What man could even contemplate it without a shudder of horror?"

For that haunting mental picture of Olga, his own beautiful, tender-hearted, delicate Olga, standing up deadly pale, in a common felon's dock, and arraigned alone, before a stern judge and twelve stolid jurymen, for the most hideous crime known to vile humanity, had floated all those hours wildly before his excited brain, and had almost unmanned him for the task of saving her. He had thought it out, as in times of anguish one *will* think out one's coming misery, down to the pettiest details, the most sordid and horrible and

sickening possibilities. In those few short hours he had died of grief and shame a thousand times over. Last night's suspense, as he stood waiting for the slowly crawling and creeping tide, was as nothing to the agony and horror of soul he had known since he returned to find Olga—in fact if not in intention, at law if not in equity—a murderer, a murderer! If he had spoken harshly and angrily to Sir Donald Mackinnon, he had ample grounds for it. The crime that the old Highlander by his superstition and folly had forced upon Alan's own beautiful innocent Olga was enough to make any man stern and revengeful.

For Alan Tennant knew—knew beyond the shadow or possibility of a doubt—that Olga herself in her waking moments was utterly incapable of hurting in any way the feeblest or tiniest of living creatures. He knew that she loved Norah devotedly. He knew that in that condition of will to which the mesmerist by his mere bodily power can reduce some of the most delicate and highly-strung of human organisations, no living being, however pure or good or true or holy, can resist the most hideous or ghastly or wicked of suggestions distinctly presented to it. He knew that under such circumstances the agent becomes but a puppet in the hands of the operator, working out unconsciously as in a vivid dream, without sense of right or wrong, without effort or deliberation, without will or motive, the wildest fancy or maddest impulse of the more active intelligence. He knew all that—knew it to the point of absolute certainty: but

what hope or chance or prospect was there that he could ever make twelve hard-headed British jurymen, with a hard-hearted English judge to direct them, see the matter in the light that he saw it?

Woe betide the innocent man or woman whose actions, however righteous or however unconscious, sin against the hard-and-fast technical puerilities of English lawyers. Though their souls be as fair and white and pure as Olga Trevelyan's, though all that is wise or good in the life of England stand aghast at the hideous threatened injustice, those implacable pedants, with their clogging precedents and their hair-splitting distinctions, will nevertheless tie a noose so tight round the culprit's neck that the common conscience and common justice of the whole startled English nation will never, never serve to unfasten it.

Alan walked slowly into the next room.

"Where is Miss Trevelyan?" he asked of the servant.

"Here!" the girl said, with her finger on her lip, pointing vaguely to the bed. "Asleep. Don't wake her. She fell asleep the minute that gentleman with the long fingers began to walk up and down the passage, muttering."

"Let her sleep," Alan said, sitting down on the couch. "Better let her sleep the whole effect off. This mesmeric trance has been very terrible in its intensity and duration."

Olga slept soundly, as usual, with her eyes staring wide open. For awhile, she lay motion-

less and quiet on the bed, but presently, the servant beckoned uneasily to Alan, who rose at once, and gazed with anxious eyes down upon her. Her face was beginning to be horribly distorted, and a terrible fixed look of fear and agony seemed to grow with each moment in her glaring eyeballs. It was clear that another paroxysm was coming on. Alan stood and watched it closely from hard by in breathless excitement.

At last, moved as if by some strength not her own, she started to her feet, quivering like an aspen leaf, and stood on the hearthrug, wildly facing him. With clasped hands, and bent head, she paused there for a moment in deathly silence, her great eyes fixed in awful earnestness on some ghastly object which seemed to float invisible in the air before her. A deep voice appeared to ring unheard in her ears. She leant forward in awe as if to catch its accents.

"Kalee, Kalee," she murmured low, in a faint tone: "I hear you. I hear you."

Then she drew herself up suddenly into an imposing attitude, sublime, tragic, as if another soul inspired her, and cried aloud in implacable accents:—

"Choose; choose; between me—or Death. You have scorned me! You have betrayed me! This choice alone, this choice alone remains! Obey! Obey me!"

Alan started back with a thrill of horrible recognition. Sir Donald's pale face, looking in from the passage at the half-open door, answered it back mutely. Both at once read aright her mysterious action. Carrying on the impulse of the

mesmeric state, she was dramatising the ideas that floated through her mind: acting in her sleep both her own part and the part of Kalee.

She dropped her head submissively once more. A cold chill ran visibly across her shapely shoulders. Through a mist of horror that seemed to obscure her vision she groped with her hands feebly for someone.

"Alan," she cried, "help me! help me!"

Alan restrained himself with a terrible effort. To wake her now would be no less than homicidal.

She drew herself up again proudly to her full height. Her voice a second time rang cold and majestic. She spoke still as the mouthpiece of the pitiless Kalee:—

"While your eyes remain open for ever in sleep, you shall have no other help but mine—but Kalee's. You shall see me floating like a black Terror for ever before you. You shall worship me and serve me all your life long. Mystical, awful, bloodthirsty, implacable, I shall stand beside you and watch over you always."

Then she pealed out a few sonorous words of rolling Hindustani. Sir Donald alone knew what they meant:—

"I am Kalee, Kalee, the swarthy fury, of a hideous countenance, dripping with gore, crowned with snakes, and hung round with a garland of skulls at my girdle. I am she, the horrible, of mis-shapen eyes; menacing, trident-topped, riding on a tiger: the Black One, the fierce, the terrible, the bloody-toothed. My fangs are red with the flesh of my victims. Choose, choose, this day, which you will take: choose, between me and Death, my votary."

It was part of the long-forgotten litany of Kalee, sung over her cradle years, years before, by her ayah in India.

Olga hung her head submissively once more. There was a short struggle—an internal struggle. Then she lifted her eyes proudly in a moment's defiance.

"Let me choose death," she said. "Let me choose death, Alan, if death means innocence."

The paroxysm was over. She sank back once more exhausted on the bed. The invisible Presence seemed to fade away, vanquished from before her. Kalee had fled—fled discomfited. But her eyes stood open, open wide as usual.

"Run quick," Alan whispered to one of the servants. "Borrow a case of instruments for me and a bottle of chloroform from Dr. Hazleby's."

The servant ran, and returned immediately, bringing the case as ordered, and a small phial. Alan chose a lancet carefully from the box, and poured a few drops of the chloroform on a corner of his handkerchief. Then he held the wet spot close to Olga's mouth. It took immediate effect. She breathed more heavily. The chloroform had stilled her.

He grasped the lancet firmly in his right hand and made a slight incision, with dexterous gentleness, first on the right, then on the left temple, a little below the two wee scars left by the flint knife of the Indian fanatic. Each cut severed a tiny

branch nerve, inhibitory to the action of the small muscle which closes the eyelid. A little round drop of blood oozed slowly forth from the capillary vessels on either side, opened by the lancet. Alan brushed them away lightly with his own handkerchief. Next, he loosed with the sharp blade the silken string that tied the silver image of Kalee round her throat. The wretched bauble should no longer remain to vex her with its memories and recall its hideous half-forgotten associations. He took out his pocket-knife, and with deliberate fingers hacked the soft metal into a thousand small pieces. It was pure unalloyed silver, like most Indian jewellers' handicraft, and it cut easily without much resistance. He flung the shapeless fragments angrily out of the open window. They fell unseen among the grass on the lawn. Kalee was annihilated—dead and gone, for Olga Trevelyan, for ever and ever.

He returned to the bed. The action of the operation had been instantaneous. Olga's eyelids lay closed in sleep, with her head resting gently on the smooth white pillow. Her rich silken hair, thrown back in soft tangled masses from her brow, almost shrouded her temples from sight; but a tranquil smile played gently about her lips, and she looked like some Italian picture of a beautiful saint, painted in the days when saintliness was still no rare attribute among us. Her long dark lashes closed over her eyes, that were never more to be open for Kalee.

"Let her sleep," Alan said, "till she wakes

of herself. Mr. Keen, come here! Undo your passes!"

The mesmerist, waving his long thin hands, went through the releasing movements once more, exactly as he had done before with Norah. The peaceful look deepened on her face as he waved them, and the gentle eyelids closed tighter and tighter.

Olga Trevelyan had ceased for ever to be a votary of Kalee.

Alan watched her, speechless, by her side, for hours together. She slept so long, he almost feared at last it was as she herself had said in her agony. Had Kalee claimed her? Was Death coming to put his seal at length upon her perfect innocence?

From time to time, they stepped in noiselessly and brought him tidings of Norah Bickersteth. But Alan himself refused to move from Olga's side. He must watch still over her safety.

At six, she woke. She woke quite naturally, as if from ordinary sleep. Alan and the servants bent over her, enquiring.

"Alan, Alan!" she cried, lifting up her hands to him joyfully. "Then it 's all right! You 're back, you 're back again!"

"Yes, yes, darling," Alan cried, stooping down and kissing her for the first time, unabashed by the presence of others in so terrible a moment. "And Norah's alive—alive and recovering. She's just taken some nourishment this minute."

Olga gazed at him blankly with a strange look of doubt and hesitation on her beautiful countenance.

"Norah?" she said in an enquiring voice. "Norah? Recovering? From what is she recovering? . . . I seem to remember. . . . I fancy I dreamt. . . . No, no. . . . I don't know anything about it. Has Norah been ill? Have I been ill? Have we slept long? What's that bottle for? Why am I on the bed here? I can't recollect it!"

Alan drew back a step in surprise.

"Thank God! thank God!" he cried. "She was still mesmerised! She's forgotten every word, every word about it!"

As he spoke, Mrs. Tristram glided gently into the room.

"Mr. Tennant," she said in a low voice, "never mention anything of all this to Norah! She's wide awake now, and she doesn't remember a moment in any way since she first fell asleep in the drawing-room last evening."

Happily, those two young lives were spared till long afterward all knowledge of the awful drama in which they had unconsciously played the part of chief actors. They only knew, for the present at least, that that horrid mesmerising had given them both a serious illness.

Olga's eyes closed automatically for a second. They opened again next instant with a burst of astonishment.

"Why, what's this?" she asked in uncontroll-

able surprise. "My eyelids seem to move like a hinge of themselves, somehow."

Alan took her hand tenderly in his.

"I have cut a little nerve that held them back," he said. "Henceforth, Olga, they will close in sleep like everybody else's."

"And I shall never have those horrible, horrible dreams again?"

"Never, Olga, darling; never! never!"

She let her head fall gently back against his breast. They were left alone now for a single minute.

"Alan," she whispered, low in his ear, "my darling, my darling, I am quite, quite happy."

When Olga Trevelyan and Alan Tennant were married at St. George's, some six months later, everybody said the bride was looking prettier and stronger than she 'd ever looked in her life before, with that odd expression quite gone altogether from her face and eyes, and such a healthy natural girlish glow on her cheeks instead of it. And everybody considered Norah Bickersteth far the sweetest and daintiest of the four bridesmaids. So much so, indeed, that Captain Leigh-Tennant (Alan's rich brother, who inherited their uncle Leigh's money)—that dashing young officer in the 8th Hussars—arrived at a very satisfactory understanding with her in the dance that finished up the day's festivities. And if Harry Bickersteth went away that evening with a sore heart, muttering to himself that even Alan Tennant, good

fellow as he undoubtedly was, wasn't half good enough for Olga Trevelyan, it is probable that in the end he will illustrate the truth of his own vaticination, and console himself in a few years' time with some other girl more nearly his coeval.

As to Sir Donald Mackinnon, when he recovered somewhat from his first fright, and came to think the matter over seriously, he would shake his sapient head at times and mutter in a wise voice to his friend Keen,

"My dear sir, that young doctor fellow explained the thing on strict scientific principles very glibly and eloquently, no doubt: but for my part, I must say, between you and me, when I come to put two and two together, I somehow fancy that in spite of everything, there must be a little kernel of truth after all in the Kalee business."

To which Mr. Keen would answer with a solemn shake of his head,

"Nonsense, Mackinnon; that's all your pure Highland superstitiousness and nonsense. Do you want me at my time of life to begin believing in a whole pack of heathen gods and goddesses? The less said about Kalee, I think, the better. Between you and me, if it comes to that, it's a precious good thing for us two that that young doctor fellow happened to come home in the nick of time to help us out of such a very awkward predicament. We may thank our stars the thing was all hushed up as cleverly as it was, between him and Mrs. Tristram. It'd have been a precious fishy business for you and me, I can tell you, my

friend, if the girl had gone and died after all, and we 'd been mixed up in the hocus-pocus. Kalee wouldn't have gone far, I fancy, to help us out of it with a coroner's jury."

"But how about her brother?" Sir Donald once objected, with a grim smile of conclusive logicality. "What do you make of the murder of her brother—found in his cradle strangled, you know, as I told you that day, with a blue line right round his throat? Who on earth but that girl could possibly have murdered him?"

The mesmerist shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"My dear Mackinnon," he said with some asperity, "how should I know how everything has always happened everywhere? Am I an Indian detective, for example? Surely the fanatic, whoever it was, who dedicated the girl herself in the first place to Kalee (as her eyes bore witness), would have been quite capable of throttling her brother into the bargain as a sacrifice to his deities? You 're quite at liberty to believe in Kalee yourself, if it gives you any personal consolation to do so: but I for my part utterly refuse to have anything to say to these strange gods."

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